

Act 1:
Love & tragedy

"If a girl walks in and carves her name in my heart"

"I'll turn and run away"

-Real Talk-Send Me An Angel

"May everyone live and may everyone die"

"Hello my love and my love, goodbye"

-Leonard Cohen-Here It Is

Chapter 1

It was a Friday night, late, slower than usual for a businessman like myself. I was in my apartment overlooking the Old City, sipping a glass of Semi Poujol's Le Temps Fait Tout, imported from Paris by a friend of mine who owns a liquor store and cigar shop in the middle of downtown. I had the windows open, the smells of the pizza joint across the way, more faint than usual due to the misty kind of rain hanging in the air outside. I was stretched out on the couch, leisurely, smoking a Marlboro 72 light, my brand of the month, and enjoying the breeze in a pair of Hanes all-cotton boxer briefs, blue with a red stitching, when the phone rang. I checked the screen ID before answering, Chuck, another cab driver for the airport on the other end, probably with a job offer.

"Chuck, how you doing, man?"

"Sean, brother, you busy, my friend?"

"Unless you count sipping wine and counting flowers on the wall as busy, no sir."

"I just dropped a lady off, Market Square, she's here for the conference tomorrow. Asked if I knew any nice gentlemen around town. Of course I lied and said I knew one. You interested?"

"You at least get a name before you pimped me out, Chuck?"

"Yeah, brother, get this. Her name is Hart, Cynthia Hart. Is that fucking kismet or what, Sean?"

I could hear him laughing though the phone at his own joke. Little fat bastard, he always led the good paying women and good looking women my way. Of course we had to rib each other once in a while. A couple of times, I even offered to put him in the game with some of my less specific clients.

But Chuck was married, happily married, no. But married none the less, he cursed like a sailor and drank away most of his fare, but marriage meant something to him. The man had honest values. I respected him for it, and I always cut him in on the profits.

"What's she look like? She's not gonna be at some dive on Cumberland, throwing back beer and slaw dogs is she?"

"Hell no, brother. This girl is an angel! Absolute fucking doll."

"I'm listening," I said, getting interested, finally sitting up and considering getting dressed while downing my glass of wine. No way I was going to waste good wine. And he said Market Square, so I could walk to my destination, shit, I could crawl if it came down to it. I gave him my undivided attention. "Come on, Chuck, speak!"

"She's your type, my man. Skin like molasses, nice round breasts, a little bit of a tummy. The kind you could hold onto and... Oh sorry. Hair's short, in a kind-of bob. These dimples when she talks, I tried to keep my eyes on the road, it was hard, man. But her eyes, she had some kind of silver eye shadow, that made them, I don't know, almost glow. They hung low, like she'd been smoking, you know I offered her a bag of fire weed. She said she didn't smoke. She has natural bedroom eyes. I mean, when she paid me and asked me about a male friend. I was speechless, got lost in there for a second."

I could hear the strain in his voice describing this woman to me. I had faith in Chuck and his descriptions were never off.

"Where'd you pick her up at?" I asked, while standing and walking across the room to the hall closet, where I kept my one nice suit, dry cleaned weekly, even if I hadn't been out. Wrapped in plastic and a suit bag, at all times. This thing was immaculate. A couple grand it had cost me, and worth every penny.

"Crown Plaza," he replied. "Saw her key-card when she started to pay me. She's staying in the penthouse, man. For a four day conference. The fucking penthouse." I listened, slightly intrigued. I pulled the suit bag off the hanger and unzipped it, smelling the cleaners detergent through the plastic bag. "She's got red highlights in her hair and a blood red dress. Man, she's fucking beautiful."

"Okay, you got me," I replied, tearing the plastic off the suit. "Where's she going to be at?"

"Should be strolling around Market Square," Chuck laughed, "she didn't realize all she had to do was walk across the street and down some steps. I'm actually quite certain. Or maybe she just wanted a stranger and not someone from the hotel, to ask for some company."

"Did she leave a number?" I asked running a lint roller over the immaculate suit before me, I didn't even want to put it on, it was so dapper. I knew a guy, that knew a guy, and got it way under price.

But the stitching alone let people know where it had come from and made people stop mid-conversation to admire it's beauty.

"Yeah," he replied, "you got a pen?"

"Chuck, give me the number and get off the damn phone. I trust you, okay?"

Chuck gave me the number followed by a nice line of profanities that men who share bonds are known to pass back and forth in a joking tone, then hung up.

A ray of light from the streetlamp outside my living room window blazed across the room, giving the suit an angelic glow. Designed and tailored by the one and only John Reyle, the suit was a one of a kind.

A black suit top, with red inseams, gray stitching and only one pocket on the outside, the right, the inside was loose, an inner right

pocket high on the chest, the material a silky red, the pants were more of the same, but with two front pockets and one on the back, left.

A red Louis Vuitton tie with seven silver lines going horizontally hung around the neck of the hanger, tucked inside was an officially branded one of a kind Armani white knit dress shirt, twelve buttons, all black, sparkled in the light of the streetlamp. I kept a nice pair of shoes, polished and tucked away, for the occasions I chose to wear the piece of artwork before me out in public, compared to the suit, the top cap Ralph Lauren black dress shoes were shabby, even with a glow of polish that I could breathe on and wipe away a smudge.

I walked down the steps, dodging the one that always creaked so loud I would grit my teeth. I opened the green door and was in the Old City, my night had begun, a job was underway, honestly, I felt alive, like Lestat walking through the streets of New Orleans in the 80s. I was ready, I was focused.

I would find my prey, make her forget about her problems at home, her job, her flaws, whatever they may be. I would seduce this woman like she was a regular lover, not someone paying for my services. The way Chuck described her, I had a hard time believing picking a man up would be very hard. This woman sounded like an absolute ten and I wanted to find out. I was about to walk in the rain before I realized the trolley ran late on Fridays in the summer.

The Green Line would get me where I needed to be in a matter of minutes, besides, I wanted to stand out in front of Hannah's and let the ladies inside see me, their men sick with envy. I was dressed to kill like a sexual James Bond movie and I was feeling the energy. I felt like I had snorted a line before leaving the loft, but knew otherwise, hell, I had never even put coke up my nose to begin with.

The trolley arrived just as a homeless man in dirty rags he liked to consider clothes and bedding was asking for a cigarette, I gave him two. What can I say? I was feeling too good for everything to go right tonight, I could feel it, down in my bones. I rode the trolley as far as Locust before I made a hasty exit, there was a stench on-board, a mix of piss and pure grain alcohol that made my stomach churn.

I never really used cologne, but if I had that odor would have eaten it away in minutes. I walked up the avenue, glimpsing to my left.

An iron fence around a large parking lot sat there, I wondered what building had been torn away to make this monstrosity, one day, I'd leave a more positive mark on the lot, christening it for the building lost so more suburbanites could park in my part of town.

I lit a cigarette and slowed my stroll down to a brisk walk, eyeing the park ahead. I wondered if she would be there, staring into the pond at the park's bottom, reflections of the stars making her eyes sparkle.

I caught a familiar chill walking through the small park towards the lower end of Market Square. The thrill of the hunt, even if it's a guarantee, always gave me a chill, butterflies in the stomach. I could feel my balls tightening at the idea of spending the night with a woman of class, of elegance. I mean, there were women around, that weren't tricks, that were friends and I loved them, but the scent of sex with a woman men of my caliber weren't allowed to believe existed, that does something to me, something hard to explain.

The sounds of a Friday night on the Square hit me before I even stepped up onto the Square proper sidewalk. Live music this way, hot food that way, alcohol mixed in with all of it. I glimpsed around, halfway expecting I'd have to hunt for her, kill the romance by calling her cellular phone and asking directions, but I was wrong. The short stage where they put on Shakespeare in the Summer, at the top of the Square, she stood leaning against one of the four support beams, watching the lights sparkle through the fountains on the TVA steps.

Chuck was right, she looked like the Devil in a Red Dress, or an Angel in Red, whichever you prefer. Even from a distance I could see the little silver lines above her eyes, the pronounced curves in her thighs, hips and breasts. She didn't just look beautiful, she looked delicious like a red apple fresh off of the tree.

I tossed the cigarette away and stopped at a water fountain, rinsing off my fingers and gargling a little bit of it in my mouth, Chuck didn't tell me if she was a smoker or not. I was suddenly nervous as I got closer to her, less than ten steps away, softly from one of the clubs, I heard a song I knew well,

"Night Calls" by the recently deceased Joe Cocker. I stood there a moment, admiring her body, the curves, the angles, the way the

dress cried out to be peeled away from chocolate flesh. I tapped my foot to the rhythm as I realized it must be 80s night at one of the joints close by, most likely Preservation Pub, I would do my best to convince her to go there with me, as soon as I spoke to her.

I whispered her name under my breath, twice before I managed to say it loud enough for her to hear me.

"Cynthia?" I asked, she turned again and our eyes met.

The street lights playing tricks off the silver lines above her eyes. I could sense a hurt buried inside her somewhere. I noticed the diamond ring on her wedding finger, but being a gentleman of the night, chose not to speak on it. What she does back home, is none of my business, I'm paid for the here and now, was my mentality, even if only for a little while. She stepped down the two steps, slowly, calculated.

I could tell she had been drinking as well. The smell on her breath escaped me, but when she spoke my name I knew it wasn't anything from the bars around here. The wine on her breath was too fancy for these joints. I couldn't name the brand, but I knew it was probably stashed up in her hotel room.

"Sean?" she said, shyly. She squeezed her arms together causing her breasts to bulge at the top of her dress. "You are Chuck's friend, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, taking her left arm in my right and leading her in the general direction of Preservation Pub. "Have you eaten?"

"Yeah, I ordered at the hotel before I called Chuck. Some little Japanese place that delivered. Sushi and spring rolls. A little bottle of Sake'. Do you like Sake', Sean?"

"When it's cold, I don't really drink the warm stuff much. What's the other smell on your breath though?" I asked, intrigued. "It's a wine, but I can tell it's not local. It smells great."

Cynthia breathed into her hand and giggled. She did the same and brought the perfume of the wine caught in her hand up to my face. I inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of the wine and the smells of her flesh behind it. The body lotion was expensive, too. Dolce and Gabbana if I had to take a guess, a blend of honey was in there somewhere, I would assume it was with the spring rolls.

I couldn't smell the foods on her breath, she had cleaned up before coming out, but the wine had come after.

"I still don't know," I honestly replied, holding open the door to the Pub for her, guiding her up the stairs to the second floor and tables with candlelight.

"It's an orange Pet-Nat I forget the brand, my husband brought it back from France last year. He's been pretty frigid since. I knew I had a conference coming up so I stole his treasured bottle of wine and drank the whole bottle over delivery sushi. I'm sorry, I'm sure you don't want to hear this," she mutters rapidly as I ease out a chair for her to sit across from me, the music downstairs, vibrating through the floor, sending tingles through my chair, through my body. I know she feels it too.

"Oh, I don't mind," I reply, giving her a typical devilish grin, but she's buzzed so it does the trick.

Cynthia's truly is stunning to look at, the lines in her forehead, marks of beauty and the work she has put in to get where she is in this world of industry and commercialism. The silver above her eyes plays tricks in the candlelight, making shadows dance across her eyebrows every time she turns her head.

"Tell me more about you, instead of him, I mean unless you want to talk about him all night, I'm sure your room has the pullout couch. I am also a licensed shrink, you know?"

Cynthia laughs and it warms me, feels good deep inside. One of the bartenders that knows me, knows my occupation, makes her way to the table and asks what all we'll be having. I order a full bottle of trusty aged Jack Daniels bourbon and two glasses, a small bucket of ice, a bowl of fried pickles and she takes leave. Yeah, fried pickles aren't on the menu, but I tip well and some of the bartenders owe me more than they can ever repay in fried pickles. Cynthia smiles at the way I handled our order, taking control, laying it all on the table. She reaches under the table and squeezes my thigh, purring quietly.

"I love that suit," she says, her hand massaging my thigh under the table, my hardness, teasing the sides of her fingers. "How, may I ask, did you get one of his suits all the way in Knoxville, Tennessee?"

"Oh, you recognize it," I reply, actually aroused more at the fact she knows who made my suit.

"Are you a Reyle fan?"

"My husband owns three," she replies, squeezing at my penis, gauging the girth, knowing from where her hand is on my thigh, I can capture the depth easily. She cups the edge of the head, massaging it through the material, through my boxers. I moan quietly as the bartender returns, her hand doesn't leave my thigh.

"Sean, might I recommend the rooftop, it's closed due to the rain, but I'm sure Charles wouldn't mind if you were up there," she asks, noticing Cynthia's hand, but not acknowledging it. I nod and we stand, following her around a smaller stage and up a long steep flight of wooden stairs. The stiffness in my pants, held in place by two layers of fabric,

Cynthia is ahead of me, her skirt rising as we climb the stairs, I believe on purpose. I see thick chocolate thighs that climb into the dress, a round firm and bare ass greets me as we near the top of the stairs. Cynthia stops suddenly pretending to trip, my face finds its way between her cheeks, feeling heat, smelling sex and another expensive fragrance.

Before the bartender notices, she is walking again, looking over her shoulder, grinning. I let out a soft sigh as they reach the rooftop doorway. I light up a cigarette and just stand there, listening to the bartender escort Cynthia to a table near the edge of the building, overlooking Market Square. Cynthia seems pleased with the view, the bartender returns to the door, smiling, and waves me past her.

As she descends the steps, I rise, exiting onto the roof, the misty rains have stopped, a light fog in the air. It blankets us from the Square below, just coming alive. Cynthia is leaned against the edge, her dress, blowing sideways in the breeze, exposing her round booty and small vagina. The labia too is chocolate colored, but the walls, are a bright pink and look moist even from a distance.

I stand beside her, looking down at the crowd, imagining the taste of her pussy, the warmth of it on my face. Cynthia leads one of my hands to her crotch, using my fingers to rub it up and down, I can feel her clit hardening, her juices starting to run.

She looks at me and smiles, her other hand finding my hardness again. I had expected to make it to the hotel, but it seems Cynthia wants something else, something hard, fast and rushed. I am tempted to tease her, drag it on as long as possible, please her in more ways than one.

Cynthia releases my hand and my penis at the same time, I massage her clit as she pours both of us a shot and lights one of my cigarettes. We throw back the drinks and she inserts my fingers into my mouth, a sensation of bliss as I taste her juices behind the hard liquor.

Sweet and sticky, the juices that leak from her pink fountain. I have the urge to suck her pussy right then, to make her cry out to the crowds below, to come on my face, to beg for me to ram myself inside her until she comes again and again, but I resist. I want to see what she has in mind.

"Does that taste good to you, daddy?" she purrs, pouring two more shots, this time, rubbing her clit and smearing the juice along the rim of my glass.

"If I said no, I'd be a liar," I reply, taking the glass from her, licking the rim and downing the shot.

Cynthia's juices mixed with the liquor excited me more. I had the feeling whatever I was feeling amiss earlier was beginning to transpire, as if she were the one being paid to satisfy me. But who was I to say no, so I went with it, decided to let this road lead us where it may.

I took the cigarette from her lips and took a long drag, she sat in one of the chairs, elbows on the edge of the roof and as if nothing had just happened began talking, about herself, about her husband.

It was a strange turn of events, but I listened. I took the chair beside her and moved it so I could sit as close to her as possible, wrapping an arm around her as she gave me her life's tale. Cynthia laid her head on my shoulder and started at the beginning. They had been high school sweethearts in New York, swearing to be together forever.

Cynthia had taken his promises to heart and had thought he had as well. The first few years were rough, colleges in different states,

weekends together few and far between, after college, they were together again, inseparable. He continued to pursue a Bachelor's degree while she worked day and night at a firm for the rights of mentally handicapped youth. He graduated and went to Wall Street, becoming a fund manager in under a year, she became a partner within three.

They were happy, or so she thought, he had long hours watching the market, talking to companies whose stocks were in his control. Trips to other states and countries became normal, a monthly thing, then a weekly thing until he was hardly at home at all. Cynthia had always been faithful to her husband, kept the house clean no matter her hours, cooked when he was in town, on Skype when he wasn't.

Cynthia had her suspicions. And last year after France, he came back, distant and cold. At that point, she started sobbing into my neck, telling me about the lipstick on his white shirts, the perfume on his slacks. I shushed her with an index finger to the lips and kissed them, then I kissed the tears and whispered in her ear, "I'll always be here for you, Cynthia."

She moaned softly and kissed me back, hard. Our teeth met with a soft clink and spread for our tongues to find access in a foreign mouth. I kissed her soft and slow, nibbling on her bottom lip and licking her neck with the tip of my tongue. She rose from her chair and sat in my lap, her warmth filling my crotch, causing me to moan with desire.

Cynthia wiggled her shoulders as she kissed me, her dress sliding down around her breasts, large, lovely nipples greeted me as she poured drops of Jack onto her nipples and pulled my face in close to suckle the liquor from her hardened flesh. I obliged and switched back and forth between the two, then she squeezed them together and I had both in my mouth at the same time.

My slacks felt wet and hot as she rubbed her crotch back and forth across my shaft through my clothes. I felt a hand reach down and grasp at my pants, freeing the button and expertly unzipping them. I lifted her up, gripping her ass tight as she slid my pants and boxers down, my hardness, rubbing against her opening for the first time.

Cynthia was ready well before the moment, she guided me into her tight warmth, trying to find an angle to take more of me into her body. I sat back down and moaned aloud as I entered her fully, pushing past her lips and labia, deep inside her warm pink opening. Her juices ran down my shaft, warming my balls and making them sticky. The sensation was one I would remember forever, but something still felt off.

I pushed her up off of me, the air feeling cold on my moist and wet shaft, I tucked it into my pants and zipped up, while she stared at me, mouth agape.

"The fuck is this shit, sir," she yelled at me, adjusting her dress, ignoring the little lines of liquid running down her thighs. "I'm paying you for a service and you are not fulfilling your part of this bargain."

"What's really going on here," I replied, lighting a cigarette and inhaling hard.

I was confused and I wanted answers. If I had to walk away from the money, I would walk away from the money. No harm, no foul, no need to be paid.

"What do you mean? He cheated on me repeatedly and now he won't sleep with me! I'm out of town with a get fucked for free, well, not free, card and that's what I thought was happening right here!"

"There's more to it than that," I said, eyeing her reaction, gauging her demeanor. "I can feel it, it's more than that. Clearly this isn't the first time you've done this. There was no shyness, no hesitation. Talk to me, or I walk, simple as that."

Cynthia hesitated, trying to muster a smile, trying to step closer, reaching out. I backed away and stood my ground, feeling like an asshole, but knowing it was required. The desire to finish what we had started was strong, but the desire to know, was much stronger.

"Why can't we just fuck and be done with it, Sean?" she asked, again reaching for me. "Tell me that first and I'll answer your questions."

"Because that's not the way I work," I replied, "I know something is up and I'm not going to take part in your game, whatever it is. Sex and romance are fine and dandy, but something else is going on."

"He's here, too," she replied. "Somewhere in this city, doing the same thing I am, with some other woman. I know he is, because he told me. And the son of a bitch thinks I'm just going to take it. I'm doing this to prove a point and if he doesn't get the point, I'm filing for divorce when we get back to the city. Simple as that."

At this point, she had started sobbing again, I finally gave in and let her grab me this time, her face burying itself into my neck. Her warm tears running down the neck of my suit, absorbing into the fabric at my stomach line, somewhere. I honestly didn't know how to continue at the revelation. I was as confused as this woman, my employer of the evening.

I felt like shit for dragging it out of her, but the chill was gone, my shoulders had relaxed, I exhaled. I lifted her chin and met her eyes with mine.

"Hey, Cynthia," I said, softly. "It's okay, you can make it through this."

I tossed a hundred dollar bill on the table, grabbed the bottle of Jack, and led her away towards the door downstairs. I wasn't sure at how much time had passed, the Jack was talking to me, making things soft, plush, the world had a warm fuzzy tint to it. When I opened the door, I let Cynthia step through in front of me, the liquor was affecting her as well. Every step she took was slow, calculated.

At the same time, she was wiping at her eyes, I followed slowly, not as far gone as she was, but feeling the booze, none the less. We made it to the bottom after what felt like an eternity, shuffling around into the second floor. I took her hand and led her down the curved steps to the first floor, the music was quiet, the crowd hushed. The night was nearing it's end.

I led her to the dance floor and pulled her close, the music playing mellow and soft. The song playing was a soft version of Guns N Roses "Don't Cry," the voice female, the cords and riffs, bluesy and slow instead of the original hard rock love ballad mix. I held Cynthia close and looked in her eyes, smiling softly.

"It'll be okay," I whispered in her ear as the song ended.

We spun slowly, nothing fancy, her arms around my shoulders, my hands on her hips. The DJ spinning said the name of the artist

who had sung the rendition, Savory or Sovory, something of the sort, and dropped in a promotion that she would be singing live at Scruffy City Hall in a few short weeks.

I had never heard of her, but had the urge to do some research. I would forget the name by morning, liquor fueling the night before. Cynthia sighed and pulled me away from the dance floor, leading me outside. The rain had picked up again, soft and misty, a cool breeze hanging ever close.

I held Cynthia close to me and led her away from the Pub, up the square and past the stage she had been standing on. We walked slowly across Wall Street and watched the little fountains in front of the TVA sign before proceeding up the steps.

"Where are we going?" she asked, looking around as I led her up the gray layered steps leading to the open patio between the two tall TVA buildings, Cynthia looked up, realizing how close she had been to the Crown Plaza, she giggled.

"Oh, um, yeah, we're not going in there."

"Why not?" I replied, smirking. "Isn't this where you're staying, you want revenge. Why not leave it all over the sheets for him to find?"

"I, I can't do that," she answered, looking down at the ground. She looked up at me, expecting a solution to all of her problems at home, a way out of everything wrong in her marriage.

I urged her on, taking baby steps to the crosswalk that would lead us over to the Plaza and into the main lobby. At first she resisted, then slowly, she stood close to me, stiffened her back and held my hand. I was known here, a man of the night, an elegant expense for elegant women.

The late night skeleton crew would know what was going on, would keep quiet. The business at hand had changed from pure seduction and sex to a game of cat and mouse, a plot thick with holes that were yearning to be filled. I would carry out my obligation for money, but more so, for the satisfaction that after this point, she would be a woman freed.

I love my job, I love the women I meet and hold and make love to, but more so, I love their freedom and individuality and her life at

home was clearly destroying her, piece by piece by piece. I wasn't fully comfortable with the situational hazards here, the possible return of the cheating asshole mid-thrust, but maybe that's what she needed to be free of him.

As we walked past the closed bar and the elegant staircase toward the elevator, it gnawed at my stomach like the burn from that first shot of hard liquor, the cheap shit and how it made the belly boil. Cynthia clearly loved this man with all of her heart, from what I could tell, had been with no other men, while he had spread their sacred gift with women across the country, possibly the globe.

Cynthia had dedicated her life to him at an age unheard of in today's sexual and marital climates. Her love for him warmed my heart, but his complete disregard fueled my anger. She leaned over and gave me a nervous peck on the cheek while we stood waiting for the elevator. She giggled again, smiling.

"I feel like I did on prom night, the first time me and Arnold had sex," she was blushing as she spoke. I could see a sparkle returning to her eye. Women are such sensual creatures, the simplest of behaviors can make their lives magical. I could feel it radiating off of her.

"Do you want me to be him?" I asked, as we walked into the elevator. "Should I treat this like our first times? Gentle and slow, but over in two minutes?"

This time I got a horse laugh out of her as she pushed the top floor button, Chuck was right, classic rich lady.

"No," she replied, losing some of the glow. "Just be you, Sean. Just do what you would do any other time."

Cynthia came to me as the elevator rose, kissing my lips softly, holding me close, spreading our bodies warmth's. I held her tight in my arms and spread her lips with my tongue, gently licking at the tip of hers. We shared a moment there, before the elevator came to a stop, our bodies sober, our senses aware and awake.

The doors to the elevator opened on the top floor and we separated. Standing there in the hallway was her husband, back to us, tie in his hand, slightly hunched, clearly drunk. Cynthia shoved me back into the elevator as the doors began to close and motioned with

her hand to call her. I waved and smiled and descended in the elevator.

Chapter 2

The night was ending, I had not been paid, had not fully done my job. But I was satisfied that I would see her again, tomorrow. Cynthia was one of those women that pursued what she wanted, fed her desires, maybe not sexually until now, but otherwise. I'd call her in the afternoon and begin where we had left off. As I exited the Plaza, I glanced up at the top floor windows, all of the lights were on.

I noticed a tie fly against the glass and then a bottle of liquor. It was heavy, thick glass, so the bottle busted and ran down the inside, not affecting the window at all. There was no way to tell where the argument was going, so I took a left and started the seven minute walk back to the loft.

Down Summit Hill, across Gay Street and past the strange red piece of modern art that looked like a penis twisted around a stick. I caught a glimpse of tail lights twice walking down the sidewalk, and both times, bright red tail lights, with a flickering blue license plate light. I shook it off as nothing and continued my little walk to the green door and my loft, uneventful. The streets were quiet, the breeze was cooling and the sky was clear.

The interstate was even quiet, not a thousand yards from the loft, cars zipping by quietly in the night. When I got near the door, I noticed a car pacing by, a black Nissan Maxima, I couldn't see in the tinted windows, but when it passed, the same bright red tail lights and same flickering plate light.

I pulled off the fancy rags casually and hung them back up, destined for the Asian Dry Cleaners Monday, really was anyone else as good at the dry cleaning?

I opened all the windows and let the foggy haze of the air billow in, the misty breeze hitting my warm flesh. I leaned out the center window and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply, watching the vagrants in the alley, sipping from paper wrapped bottles and attempting to sneak puffs on their little glass pipes, the Devil's Dick's, the little cherries glowing bright red, illuminating their faces before fading away. In the pre-dawn hours, only one car passed, same pale tail lights, same flickering plate light.

I tossed the but out of the window, doing my best to contribute to the filthy city I loved so much and laid back across the futon, hitting play on the digital system, turning the volume low and letting Bruce Springsteen sing about a woman's secret garden, I watched the ceiling fan spin as the air cooled my skin, it's breeze cooling the heat in my flesh.

I fell asleep before the second verse even began. My eyelids heavy, my mind at ease, my soul at peace.

Chapter 3

I awoke with a start to loud knocking at the door, I glimpsed at a clock while pulling on a pair of gray Polo sweatpants with the blue logo. Taking a second glimpse at the clock I realized, even though I had just closed my eyes, most of the day had passed me by outside. I didn't bother with shoes because the knocking only seemed to continue and get louder.

It could only be Jerry, my quirky neighbor from downstairs, standing at six feet tall and morbidly obese, think Comic Book Guy from the Simpsons with less hair and you would have a pretty good general idea. Jerry had the tendency to stroll the Old City in gym shorts, a ripped Wolverine t-shirt and a Darth Vader helmet.

"What, Jerry? Stop banging at the door," I yelled, loudly enough to be heard through the door.

I flicked the lock and pulled the green door open. Jerry wasn't even standing there. It was another man, tall, dark and handsome with a shaved head, gray eyes and a curved chin. Somehow I knew this rude son of a bitch with hatred in his eyes was Cynthia's husband, Arnold, with the clean and pressed, yes with starch, Calvin Klein T-Shirt and stone washed Louis Vuitton jeans, ego everywhere, coming out of his pores like the sweat that made his bald dome gleam.

Yeah, this cocky prick had to be the husband.

"I'm sorry," I said, flatly, though the process of lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. "I don't think I know you."

"Oh, no, my man, we haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet," he replied, his voice, deep and throaty, women would find it seductive. I found it as if he were trying to compensate for something. "But I believe you met my wife last night."

I kept the curious look, well, as much as possible when I saw him reaching behind his back, then I got a little nervous. Okay, maybe a little more than that, I'd had guns pulled on me in the past. A couple of them were even fired in my direction and it was never a good situation, this one a little more serious, right in my doorway, and I didn't expect my door to keep him or whatever kind of slugs he had in the clip out, if I could shut it in time.

A sigh of relief passed through my whole body when he pulled out an envelope, thick with cash, instead of a gun.

"Look, sir, I know you were and I'm here to vastly over compensate you for your services," he said, pushing the envelope into my chest, hard, but I stood my ground, didn't budge.

The envelope fell to the ground, I didn't lose eye contact for an instant.

"Stay away from Cynthia. I'm only going to tell you one time."

"Is that some kind of threat," I replied, testing him.

"No, I'm too rich to threaten some whore. I have friends for that type of shit, friend. Just stay away."

"So, now I'm a whore, a friend or a sir? I'm confused and offended, well confused yes, but offended, no, not really. I'm used to

the name calling from an inadequate husband or jealous boyfriend every now and then."

Arnold's gaze wavered, I had won the argument with a simple comment. He turned to leave, walking briskly in the direction of Crown Plaza. I picked up the envelope, curiously inspecting it and carried it back up the stairs to the loft, the door locking as it closed behind me. I snubbed out the cigarette and thumbed through the bills, laughing and letting them rain down across my body like Demi Moore's sequence in Indecent Proposal. I took the money, of course I did, what was I, stupid?

But that didn't mean I'd leave well enough alone. The way I figured it, he had just paid me for the entire weekend, plus Monday before they left town. The tab was paid, no bills were due. My rent and lights were taken care of for a couple of months. I'd give it a few hours for him to get some drinks in him and go on his cheating way, then give Cynthia a ring.

I laid out a Brooks Brothers Polo, crisp white with a red logo and a faded gray pair of Lacoste khaki shorts, tan ankle socks and a pair of chocolate Rockport boat shoes with tan laces, before starting the coffee machine and running hot water in the bathroom. I ran a three disc electric shaver over my face to give myself a nice barely noticeable five o clock stubble.

I slid off the sweatpants and boxers and climbed into the shower, the steam reminding me of the strange dream that I could grasp small details of, but no outline or fine lines were to be found. Just hints of the imagery, sensations like soft samples of the touch and feel of it all.

I scrubbed my face with a grainy herbal cleanser, to soften the skin and camouflage the bags under my eyes from the few short hours of sleep I had received. The Ralph Lauren body wash was scented, but faint, a fine blend of fresh fruits with a sharp hard liquor undertone, I stood away from the flow of water long enough to let it all soak in, before scrubbing myself down again, erasing the remainder of Cynthia's sweet scent from my penis and short brown amber brown pubes.

My balls were tight from the lack of a release last night, firm. The urge to massage myself to orgasm and a stream of thick white ecstasy was strong, but the will to hold back and spill it all deep inside of Cynthia was stronger.

When the water began to cool, I dried myself and stood in front of the mirror for a few minutes, smiling at the reflection of what I considered immaculate perfection. I splashed Gregorio Armani Acqua Di Gio on my crotch, neck and under my arms before getting dressed. I reached for my digital watch, the only cheap watch in my collection, by the way, that gave me caller ID and text notifications but not much else, and clasped the white band around my wrist.

I slid on a pair of Ralph Lauren Polo edition prescription glasses with egg shell frames and my wardrobe was complete. The fat little envelope of cash was filled back up and went under the kitchen sink in a key lock and combination lock safe, minus two hundred dollars in crisp new twenties that felt like they would give me paper cuts if I slid them across my flesh. My cellular phone and the cash went into the left front pocket, cigarettes, lighter and a pack of Juicy Fruit gum went into the right.

I walked down the stairs and out into hot day, making sure the door locked behind me. Bristol's car was parked in front of the gift shop next to Old City Java, so I looked both ways and crossed, making a zig-zag around parking meters towards the shop, I felt good, I looked good, I had a feeling tonight I was going to get the chance to enjoy a woman for the pleasure alone, I needed to find her a gift.

Bristol was a punk rocker, former lead singer of Suicide Chariot, a local band that gained some fame, went on some tours and then came back home. He was five seven, maybe five eight with shoulder length black hair, sleeveless shirts and dog collar wristbands.

Most days, spikes were tossed about in his hair with careless perfection, a happy accident. He always smiled and made one feel welcome at the shop. The shop was small but carried an assortment of gifts, jewelry and nick-knacks for young ladies and older women alike.

Bristol was behind the counter, wrapping gold dipped roses for shipping, smiling as always when I opened the door. I waved and

began perusing his shop's wares, eyes stopping on a quartz stone with the word Serenity cut into it. The stone was smooth on top and bottom but rough around it's edges, as if the engraver had intentionally done it that way. It reminded me of the story Cynthia had told me about her love for her husband, his love for her, and the secrets and lies within. I smiled to myself, my decision was made.

"Hey, Bristol, my man," I said, pointing to the rock in the glass case. "How's the day been treating you?"

"Well, either everybody is cheating on their wife and buying a gift to make up for it, or people are actually starting to remember birthdays and anniversaries," he replied, laughing while standing and grabbing the rock from the case. "They can't seem to make up their minds with the roses though. Some want straight up roses, which we don't carry. While others keep calling floral shops, looking for our gold and silver encrusted ones."

"Maybe if you had a website," I inquired, knowing his response.

"There is a website, Sean, you know this. Hell, you send us online business long after your "clients" are gone and away," he made the quote, unquote gesture while speaking, it was funny, in a way. Yeah, they had a website, that shipped all across America and sometimes abroad.

One time, a package got sent to a cave system in the middle of some foreign desert. How the people had the access to order something online from a cave system, let alone pay by card, was a mystery for the ages.

RomanceHer.com was the site, but the shop was named different, Bristol and the owner fearing the casual walk-by would assume it was a dirty little sex shop, not a place to buy a necklace or stone for a recently vexed girlfriend.

"How much for the stone, my brother," I asked pulling out the handful of bills. I thumbed off one of the twenties and handed it to him while he wrapped the stone in a little brown box with a gold ribbon.

"Five bucks for you," he replied, "anybody else it's twelve." He slid the box across the table and thumbed through an envelope of cash, before handing me my change, I added it to the wad and back

into the pocket the cash went. "Why you buying a rock, man? Usually you go extravagant."

"This one is different, Bristol," I said, smiling. "She seems like the wife that has everything, except the full attention of her husband."

"Another married lady, brother, be careful."

"Aren't I always?"

"No, Sean, you're really not," he said, looking concerned. "You already forgot about the husband that sliced open your back? Or the husband that put three bullets in the alley walls aiming for you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," I said solemnly, my back itching at the thought of the scar there. The whole area had healed to a thin white line, laser surgery reducing that to a permanent white sliver whenever I take the time to get sun on my back, and the bullets, how could I forget, bits of concrete had scraped my face from the ricochet, embedded under my right eye for days before working themselves out of my skin.

The bullet holes were still there, in the alley, the city never really worried about things that weren't right in front of peoples faces. I always liked to stroll the alley and see how creative the graffiti artists had gotten with them. One time, two of them had become the eyes of dark shadow of a face, engulfed in a hood, with one fist up. It was just after the Trayvon Martin shooting, a memorial for the fallen, innocent youth. I had a photo of that one, hanging in the apartment.

"Just be careful, man," he said, going back to wrapping golden flowers. I could tell by the way he turned his back to me, the conversation was over. The deal was done and his statement was final.

"See you later, bro."

"Yeah, whatever," he replied, his voice hollow, sorrow and agony underneath. I could count on three fingers my true friends, and he was one of them. I grabbed the box off the counter and exited the shop, entering Old City Java, the smells of coffee and cream filling the air.

So many blends flowing through machines, the scent reminded me of the JFG factory around the corner. I inhaled and sighed with pleasure as I ordered my house blend of the day in a paper cup and

walked back outside, sitting at one of the little wire tables out in the alley, the only one free of rich yuppies from downtown, talking about politics and the great future ahead, unaware hours ago, their current sitting locations were the overnight homes of Knoxville's hidden people, smoking their crack pipes, drinking their liquor from a paper bag.

I pulled out my cell and checked the watch for the time before scrolling through the numbers to the C's. I hit send and let it ring twice before hanging up. Long enough for the caller ID to activate, but short enough that hopefully, only a single vibration of her phone.

It was my way of contacting a client, one I had not really been able to explain last night. I hoped internally that she would know the number was mine and call me back post haste. What can I say? I wanted to feel the inside of her pussy wrapped around me, stroking me, squeezing me, making me melt. I had but a taste of her last night and

craved to feel her juices all over my body.

A text came through moments later, and I smiled.

Chapter 4

Who is this?

It's Sean, who's this?

*Cynthia, why are you texting me? Didn't Arnold come by there?
Arnold? Really, Arnold? Guy is built like a model and his name is*

*Arnold? Yeah, I'd have
went into stocks and bonds too, with a name like Arrrrnolllld.*

*Don't be mean, he said he came to see you this morning.
He did, but I didn't know if that was your feelings as well, or just his.*

*It's just his, but he got scary last night. I don't know what he's capable
of right now. He left
after he got back, took the rental, said I could call Hertz or one of
those other rental places and go see a
movie or something, he'd be back later. But I don't know. I feel like
he's watching me right now and
I'm on the top floor.
Hey, calm down, it's alright. Call the rental company and when they
deliver the car, come
through the middle of the Old City. We can go somewhere else and
talk. It will be okay, I promise.
Okay, okay, give me a couple hours and I'll see what I can do. You
promise you'll wait for me?
I'm not going anywhere, babe.
Okay, talk to you soon.*

Chapter 5

I sat at the table, smiling and sipping my coffee, lighting a cigarette, wondering where I could take her. And then it dawned on me, like a light bulb going off in my head. Right around the corner, the parking lot under the interstate, it was a Saturday afternoon, evening was already on the way, we could park in the back of the lot, be completely alone.

The lot would be full before sunset, crowds moving from bar to bar, walking up the hill to the Weigels there. Nobody would think any different seeing a couple kissing in one of the cars. The lot had no lights once the sidewalk was crossed over into the entrance. That could work, I thought to myself, if he came looking, she wouldn't be at my loft, neither would I.

Yeah, it was possible, it was almost too easy, the way the idea came to me. I took another drag of the Marlboro 72 and extinguished it on the ground before tossing it into the trash bin for outside customers. Last thing I wanted to do was cause a fire across the street from my home. I sat there and thought about the dream, attempting to remember as much of it as possible.

Some of the details came easily, but the more caffeine I got into my system, the less clear the dream was. The hazy imagery faded and bothered me, leaving me feeling like a forgetful man because I was at a complete loss trying to visualize something that had just happened a few short hours ago.

I went inside and paid half price on a refill, sat back down at the outdoor table and watched the people walking up and down the sidewalk, passing the time. As the minutes turned into an hour, the crowds began to thicken.

The bars were beginning to open, the air beginning to cool. Instead of walking up to the loft, I walked across the street to Hannah's and ordered a Long Island Iced Tea, these people knew me, knew how I liked my drinks, knew not to try and give me the bottom shelf liquors.

I watched as the cute blonde behind the counter mixed my drink and wondered why I had never taken a white woman to bed. I kept drawing a blank when she returned with my strong concoction of liquor and I slid her a twenty, expressing my gratitude for light ice and soda, by letting her keep the change.

I sipped the cool drink that made fire in my stomach in a corner booth, watching the cars go by. The phone in my pocket went off, I glanced at my watch and sure enough, it was Cynthia, calling this time instead of texting.

"Hello," I said, between gulps, downing the beverage and standing to leave.

"I'm in a black Lincoln Town Car, coming up the street, where are you?" Cynthia sounded nervous, like I was helping to set her up or something.

"I'm down at the corner, the four way stop," I replied, leaning on the trolley sign, looking in her direction. I saw the car and began to

wave, excited with the thoughts of what was to come. She accelerated a little and pulled up beside me, hanging up her phone.

"Hey, lady, can you give me a lift?" I said, jokingly, pulling the door open and stepping inside the luxury sedan. The interior was faded gray leather, the mirror had a digital display in the bottom corner, showing an angle behind the car, a back-up camera.

"Depends, sir, how far are you going?"

"Take a right," I said, easing into the seat and lighting a 72, the liquor was inside of me, loosening me up. We passed by Hannah's and Barley's, then I had her make another right. We pulled up to another four way stop and I instructed her to make another right onto Jackson Avenue, then a soft right into the parking area.

The lot was pretty full already, but there, over in the back corner, near the back side of Barley's, was an empty spot, faded light showed us the way, as the sun was beginning to set. She used the back-up camera to angle the car into the slot, rear end first. The radio was playing softly, B97.5, love songs of yesteryear hosted by Delilah. Cynthia turned off the car, but left the radio on.

Cynthia was dressed down today, more simple, still beautiful, still sexy. A white wife beater t-shirt from Victoria Secret, made her chocolate skin glow, a short tight blue jean skirt snug around her hips, riding her thighs, Nike Low-top track shoes, red, with white checks and light red, almost pink ankle socks.

Cynthia turned to me, smiled softly and spoke. "I'm sorry about this morning."

"Hey, don't worry about it," I replied, offering her a 72, she accepted and I lit the tip while she inhaled slowly. I rolled down my window and tossed mine away. "I'm used to things like that, at least he didn't come with a gun or anything."

"I know, I'm just sorry. I still don't know how he found out where you live. I don't even know where you live."

"He said he had friends around town," I commented, "maybe some of his friends know me or of me. I don't really know or care. The way I see it, he doesn't even exist right now, only you and I do. Forget about him, just for a while."

Take My Breath Away by Berlin came on the radio, Cynthia turned it up, puffed slowly on her cigarette and lip sang with the song. I could see the tears at the edges of her eyes, wanted to reach over, wipe them away, kiss her, hold her, push myself inside of her and get lost in her.

But I didn't want to interrupt her moment, lose the connection, kill the vibe inside of her. She sighed softly and tossed the butt out of her window as the song ended.

"Sean."

"Yes, Cynthia," I replied, reaching over and turning her face towards mine, our eyes making contact for the first time since I had gotten in the car.

"Can we get out of this car? I feel like it's smothering me," she asked.

"Smothering you? This car is as big as my loft," I said with a half smile, expecting her to laugh. When she didn't I opened my door and walked around the car, opening hers so she could stand. We sat on the trunk of the car, still warm from the fading sun, and watched people on the patio behind Barley's, drinking and laughing, dancing to songs that whispered in the air around us.

"Why isn't my life as simple as theirs, Sean? Why isn't yours?"

"How do we know their lives are simple, Cynthia? For all you know, their lives are as complicated as ours, as difficult to traverse as a stunt and test track. For example, that young girl over there, dancing the hardest, yelling the loudest, I bet she is the most troubled of them all. Shitty life is just a part of the living thing now. We'll never have it as easy or as clean as the people in the 70s and 80s did. Too much has changed, the population has grown too much."

"I'm just tired of feeling like I'm missing out on something fresh, something better," she said, taking my hand in hers. "I want to go out, experience life like he has, go to foreign countries, eat exotic foods where they originated from, not from an expensive deli in Times Square."

"Then why don't you," I asked, she placed my hand on her thigh and moaned as I squeezed and massaged the flesh there.

Cynthia lifted her booty off the trunk enough for the skirt to rise to her hips, exposing naked flesh, a light coating of fuzz on the inside. She eased my hand up further and held it close, her hips squeezing my hand as I massaged her leg, my thumb extended, glancing touches across the fuzz, the opening, her little button, protruding from between her lips.

"I'm going to," she sighed, releasing her hips and giving my hand access to her opening, heat washing over it as my fingers spread her labia, my middle sliding deep inside. "When we return to New York, I'm pulling my money out of our accounts and starting a separate one and hiring a lawyer."

"You should," I said before kissing the flesh of her neck, my finger probing her opening, sliding in and out of her, rubbing circles around her anus, making her filthy orchid moist with the juices running down the crack of her ass.

Cynthia moaned when I teased it, applying pressure, the tip of my finger squeezed tightly by her booty. I wanted to press deeper, see how she responded, open her up, two fingers, two openings. But I held back, kissed her lips, massaged her pussy lips, teasing her, making her moan.

"I'm going too," she moaned through gritted teeth, gripping at my shorts, squeezing me, rubbing me through the fabric. "I don't think I would have been able to. If you hadn't come into my life. You make me feel brave, Sean. You make me feel alive. You remind me of what being touched should feel like, instead of repeated motions all the time."

I lifted one of her plump breasts out of the wife beater, her chocolate skin showing across the white material, caressing it, kissing the nipple, suckling it gently. My other hand feeling around her firm little vagina, caressing the outer lips, glancing touches across her clitoris, and little inner labia lips.

I teased her with my hand, gently rubbing circles around her clitoris, sliding down, deep, soaking my finger and coming back up to twirl the circles again.

"I want you to kiss it," she cooed. Her hands running across the stubble on top of my head, her voice hoarse with pleasure. "Can you kiss my pussy, Sean?"

I kissed her lips gently, easing off the trunk of the car, she laid back, her upper body pressed against the glass, her head arched, resting on the roof, staring at the stars between the spaces of the inner-state above. She put her feet on the bumper and lifted her hips enough to pull the skirt up over her hips and around her waist.

Cynthia's dripping vagina, spread open, pink, squeezing and releasing, anticipating the feeling of my breath, my tongue massaging it. I stood back and admired her beauty, lighting a cigarette. She looked up at me, eyes looking like a fiend in need of a fix, pleasure in her face.

Cynthia rubbed her nipples, pulling the other breast free of her wife-beater. One hand ventured down her belly, between her thighs, I watched, taking it all in, as she rubbed her crotch for me, her fingers playing her clit and pussy lips like a fleshy instrument, the way her fingers slid in and out, up and down, the way she squirmed, the gasps, the moans, I watched as I smoked my cigarette, enjoying the vision before me.

I massaged my shorts with my left hand, the hardness visible to her yearning eyes. She began to slow her fingers, tighten her thighs. I shook my head, tossing the cigarette away. I took a step forward and pulled her thighs apart, watching the fingers, jealous of their magic, I put her legs over my shoulders and pulled her pussy close to my face,

I went to work like the professional I was, licking her clitoris, sucking on her labia, gently nibbling at her fat little outer lips, I forced my tongue between the clenching walls of her opening, the flavors reminding me of cactus fruit and mango, the walls relaxed, a line of warm juice freeing and clinging to my facial hair. She was cumming for me, her fingers dug into my scalp, her hips bucked, rocking the Lincoln, the thighs squeezed me close. I sung a song of love to her pussy in the form of saliva and strokes of the tongue, vibrations relaxing, the clenches increasing again.

Again she came, and again I drank, like a vampire at her veins. Her toes caressed my crotch, I took it as an invitation, unzipped the

shorts and slid them and the boxers down, around my knees. Her toes caressed me, as much as was possible, attempting to wrap themselves around me. I softly pushed her foot away and stood, pulling her close to me, her ass hanging in the air for an instant, before I entered her, all the way, deep. I eased her back onto the trunk and began giving her the slow strokes and deep pushes she yearned for.

"I, I can't," she moaned out, her pussy telling me otherwise.

"Yeah, you can," I assured her, kissing her lips and lifting her off the trunk of the car and turning around, still deep inside her.

I eased back against the car and let her ride me while I gripped her around the waist, her strokes, reverse to the head then slamming into me, claps of lust in the night, she went fast, she went slow, she grinded against me when she came again and begged me to let her down. She bent over the trunk, hands pulling her ass cheeks wide, her pink throbbing opening pleading with me to push deep inside again.

Like a true quarterback, I took a knee and buried my face between, my tongue running circles around her little rosebud of an anus and back to her pussy, teasing them both, pushing deep in her vagina and nibbling at her ass cheeks. She moaned with pleasure as I stood again, entering her slowly, juice and pressure attempting to push me back out.

I gripped at her neck and stood her up as she grinded her pussy against me from the back. One of her hands found it's way between her legs, switching between stroking my balls and rubbing her clit. She came again, hard. I nibbled on her neck and turned her head, kissing her deeply.

"It's okay, Sean," she cooed. "He made me get fixed years ago." She let out a sob that faded to moans after a few grinds against me. I pulsed inside of her. I wanted it too, to spill, to release, to melt and mold into each other like lava in a lamp. I eased out of her wet opening, she gasped, spun, looking at me.

I lifted her back onto the hood and pressed inside her wetness, moaning. She put her head on my shoulder and we rocked slowly, I could feel the build-up deep inside and grabbed her ass again, lifting her up, I kissed her then, deep in the mouth, teeth and tongue, my

hands lifting and dropping her hips slowly and deeply, I spun and pushed her against the chain-link fence.

Cynthia gripped the fence above her head and pushed down on my cock, hard but slow, deep and wet, she looked to the sky and gasped, her orgasm rocking again. I felt the urge and let go. My seed spilling deep inside her, shot after shot of smooth white tequila into the throat of life. I saw fireworks in her eyes and splashes of light in the sky as I came with her, she released the fence and held me tight, her pussy massaging every last drop out of me, her juices running down our thighs.

Cynthia began to cry on my shoulder as I eased out of her and carried her back to the car, setting her down and lifting her face to mine. I kissed her lips softly once before the first shot rang out, glass shattering, people still partying at the clubs behind the lot.

At first I thought it was a loud radio, or in some place, off in the distance, across the city or across the planet. The second shot told me it was much closer, too close. The back window of the Lincoln busted out, spraying Cynthia's back and my face with glass. The shots were targeted at someone near us, or so I thought. The third loud bang and flash of light, impact sounded closer still, sparks flew off the trunk of the car. Cynthia gasped as I pulled her close to me and down onto the hard pavement of the parking lot.

Through the shattered glass of the car windows I could clearly hear the guitar solo of Guns N Roses "Don't Cry" playing on the radio. A car door was opened, under the car I could see feet, racing in our direction. Slowing when they reached the car, coming around the side in slow motion. Shots four and five came from above us, a ski mask, gold teeth, pressure in my stomach.

The seventh and final shot bouncing off the concrete beside me, Cynthia rolled off of me and gasped. Footsteps retreating, Cynthia with labored breathing. Another set of approaching footsteps, somebody else to finish the job. I turned my head to face Cynthia, my body aching, not moving. I reached out and took her hand, gasping at what I saw, screaming.

Her face laying sideways on the pavement, one eye bulging at me but still moving, her throat making sounds, choking on her own

blood. She mouthed words, nothing came out of her mouth, but a large bubble of dark red blood, that popped splattering my face. I turned to see the man approaching, struggling to move, to make some kind of a stand, my body not willing to respond. There stood her husband, Arnold, looking both heart broken and smug, a length of pipe in his gloved hand.

"I told you to leave her alone, you son of a bitch," he screamed, bringing the pipe down once across my chest, twice, the side of my face, breaking the skin, shattering bone, salty blood filling my mouth.

A third time, the side of my head. I coughed harshly, blood spilling from my mouth, he turned, ran away. And like a movie, a movie based on real life and not some shitty romantic comedy.

Everything got bright and loud and faded to black.

Chapter 6

Time passed slower than I thought humanly possible, consciousness came and went, darkness seemed to be my new home, there was no way to tell how long I lay there, body growing cold in the summer heat, the party still going on across the way, Cynthia laid out near me, eyes no longer moving, face looking worse than when I first passed out.

I faded out again, like some cheap movie with bad editing, the images in my mind, her beautiful face shattered and broken, flesh hanging away in some places, bone and pink meat pushing through in others.

The hard concrete became air, then a mattress of sorts, pain was as constant to my body as breathing, images on repeat in my mind,

sleepless darkness filled with vivid imagery. Cynthia laying there, one eye pressed forward, blood leaking from her mouth and nose, glass peppering the ground around her.

Lights, bright, shining, pressure on my face, labored breathing made easier, pain receding, sleep becoming more of an option, faces covered in masks, voices talking, fade to darkness, images of my mother, alive and well, smoking a cigarette, Marlboro Ultra-Light 100, sitting on her fluffy black leather couch, laughing and smiling, light behind her, Bristol bent over me, shaking his head, Essence crying, leaning in, kissing my forehead, fade to darkness.

I awake in a pool of warm water, hints of chlorine and salt in the air, naked, a full moon above me, surrounded by fluffy white clouds looking pregnant with water, ready to spill down in a moments notice, naked women of all shapes and sizes, swam around me, laying by the sides of the pool. Skin tones from dark chocolate to faded caramel, nipples the size of pennies and nipples the areolas the size of silver dollars, all beautiful in their own ways. Asses large and round, the size of a juicy rump roast, some as small as a pair of pineapples, equally beautiful, passed by me in the water, some brushed against my flesh, most just passing me by in a sensual coordinated rhythm.

Slow circles they swam around me, some taking me in their mouths, some kissing my legs and back, my body an underwater easel for their sensual arts and a blank page for their lips and tongues to paint upon. One of them rose above the waters edge before me, water dripping from her hair and flesh, her eyes as green as gems in the sunlight, looking like a magnificent goddess.

She came to me, her dark chocolate skin looking as melted as the drops of water that dripped from the curve of her chin, the tips of her erect nipples. She took me into her arms, pulled me close, made me feel alive.

Her jade eyes glowed through the darkness, the rest of her face, hidden in the shadows. Clouds in the sky began to rumble as she welcomed me into her body, thunder rolled as her hips began to buck against me.

Rain drops, cold and round, pelted my flesh as she arched her back, her hands squeezing her large breasts, moans escaped my lips

as she rose, lightning flaring in the sky, illuminating her misshapen face, blood leaking out of her mouth, her nose, her ears.

Cynthia stared back at me through the darkness.

The water began to cool, the warmth gone from the air, the rain started to change into ice pellets and snow flakes, everything around us becoming a blinding white, the other women vanished from sight, one by one, each with a pop, like a balloon. The water froze around our waists, my arms locked under the ice, still grasping her gracious hips and delicious ass, the only warmth under the water, where our crotches were joined together.

Cynthia's breasts sat above the ice, as did her arms. She tried to say something, something important through the blood, I could sense the urgency in the way her body gripped mine, only bubbles came forth, popping and splattering my face with warm red droplets.

She sobbed and bowed her head.

Cynthia ran her fingers over her bloody tongue and wrote two words in a macabre font of chicken scratch, seeming to glow out of the pristine white ice that had surrounded us. I didn't want to read them, I wanted to hold her close as long as I could, so that maybe we could live, in this moment forever. She took my head in her cool hands, chilling me to the bone, turning it slowly towards the ice.

And suddenly, everything seemed to make sense.

WAKE UP was written there in her precious blood, I shook my head and sobbed, the tears freezing to my face almost instantly, my eyes rose and met hers. Cynthia leaned forward and kissed my lips, her blood seeping through my lips, warmth in the cold, and then, as if touched by an angel, I woke up.

Chapter 7

To say I awoke, fully aware, would be a gross exaggeration. I was dazed and confused, stuck in a cloudy slumber, awake but not really. The room as cold and bare, white, sanitized, a hospital. My lids lifted hazily, energy I didn't feel I had, required to lift them. Machines beeped slowly and steadily around me, attached to my skin, IVs were plugged into different veins in my arms,

I became more aware, hospital room was no longer a guess, but an obvious realization. I felt drunk, as if I hadn't been out very long, maybe just hours, realizing it was probably whatever pain medication they had me on, making me feel this way. Weakness was not something I was used to or comfortable with, stuck in place, trapped with no control over my bodily functions or limbs.

The lights were bright, seemingly blinding in their glare, adding a shadow in the darkness behind my lids when they'd close. The air around me, cold, heavy on the throat and lungs. Fading out of consciousness again, a softer feeling, more surreal, more of a state of being, a world within my own. Colors were brighter, my flesh felt itchy, aches came and went in an instant. I felt a cool wash over me, a burn in my arm.

Again I slept, realizing this was a waking moment, not some horrible nightmare, everything in the parking lot had happened, not very long ago, and reality was this hospital room around me. I fought the hazy feeling, to the best of my ability,

I lost the battle in a few moments. The clouds setting in on the beach of my mind, voices coming closer. Unaware if they were in my mind, on the beach with me, or in the hospital room, observing me.

"Do you think he'll wake up?"

"I don't really know," replied a familiar voice. "They say the draining is helping, working the blood out of his lungs, but nothing is certain at this point."

I began to fade away again. But this time, no dreams came, just bitter darkness, never-ending and all consuming.

Chapter 8

When I awoke again, my mother was sitting across the room in the noisy green pullout chair, smiling and talking to a male nurse, scratch that, he was a doctor, judging by his attire and relaxed demeanor. I had spoken with him before, his name was Ed, he had longish manicured fingernails and red hair, pulled back in a tight ponytail, those are the things I remembered the most about Ed.

Ed's face was smooth, unblemished, women would find Ed attractive for a redhead, probably even beautiful. Ed glanced my way, winked at me, grinned and laughed with my mother, patting her on the leg and then kissing her on the cheek before standing and walking into the hall.

"You know, Sean, I like him," my mother said, digging in her beat-up brown leather purse, probably looking for a Merit Ultra-Light 100 or a Goody powder. "He had some nice things to say about you, some of them, actually made a lot of sense."

My mother was a short skinny woman in her late 50s, white hair that was more yellow than gray and a list of medical and mental issues from years of drug abuse followed by life catching up with her early. She had spent too many years alone in her trailer, too many nights alone on her beat-up black leather and gray stitched couch.

My mom lit up one of her cigarettes right there in the room and looked out the window, looking beautiful for just a moment, at the city of Perryville.

"Mom, why are you here," I asked, nervously, wondering when the doctors or a nurse would kick in the door, demanding she extinguish the cancer stick.

"I'm here because it's not your time yet, son," she replied hitting her cigarette, smoke exiting her nose and mouth while her look was sullen and serious.

"I don't understand," I replied, lost in a haze, the IV in my arm again taking control of me.

"Ed needs to talk to you, Sean. About Cynthia and yourself, about life, about death," she responded cryptically, in a strange code. "He has an offer for you. It may not seem like a possibility, but Ed can deliver, Sean."

"Mom, Ed can't be real," I said, emotional at the words coming out of my mouth, "if he was talking to you, he cannot be real."

My mother looked hurt, like she had after so many of our conversations in the past. One of us angry at the experiences, the other trying to apologize. Her eyes screamed to the Heavens for tears and her lips trembled. Another apology was on her lips, one I would hear, but I would not accept. Because some times, some things just cannot be let go.

"And why can't Ed be real, Sean," she asked, barely keeping the composure she was fighting to grasp.

"Because," I sobbed, "because you're dead."

I mumbled it out more than speaking it aloud, before everything began to fade again, tears in my eyes and sorrow in my heart.

"But you're not, son, you're alive. Go back to the real world. Have a talk with Doctor Ed, he can help you, son."

My mother kissed my cheek and began to fade away as I faded away into sleep. The darkness consumed me again, space, timeless, infinite, silent and hollow.

Chapter 9

When I opened my eyes again, Ed was standing in the corner, talking to Essence and Bristol, chatting them up while a nurse checked my vitals and wrote down the information. I tried to speak but my throat was dry, a tube inserted into it.

I choked and tried to pull it out, the padded cuffs on my wrists holding me down. The nurse realized I was awake, aware, conscious

and gagging on the feeding tube in my throat. Ed began approaching me and I flinched, nervous that I was still asleep.

"Now, now, Sean," he said, his voice oddly soothing. "Calm down."

"I'm just going to remove the tube now. You may feel a slight pull, just close your eyes and try not to vomit, OK?"

I nodded and closed my eyes, at first I felt a tickle in my throat, then pressure, it felt like my organs were attached to the small skinny tube, I choked and gasped, waited for the feeling of suffocation and to taste my own blood, but the feelings never came. I opened my eyes again to find Ed standing there with Bristol and Essence close by, both of my friends, crying with joy or sorrow, I couldn't tell which.

"Would one of you please go get a cup of ice from the nurses station, I'm pretty sure our friend here needs it?"

Essence nodded and opened the door, a tidbit of the BeeGee's "I Surrender" whispering through the doorway from the nurses station. Bristol came over and shook my hand, smiling.

"You never take my advice," Bristol said, smiling but with a slight frown behind it.

"Do I ever," I responded, dryly, before coughing for nearly a minute. Essence returned with the ice, handing it to me, humming the tune of that Bee Gees song. I greedily took chunks of the ice into my mouth, chewing them to dust, letting them melt and moisten my tongue and cool my dry throat.

"We'll be back in the morning, boo," Essence said, kissing my cheek. "The doctor has questions, and so do the police."

"Thank you," I whispered, trying not to go into another coughing fit. They both made little waves of the hand and exited the room, leaving me alone with Ed, the ever grinning doctor, who shut the door and sat on the edge of my bed.

"You've been in and out of an induced coma for over a week," he said, as if it were all normal. Being a doctor, it probably was normal to him. "We had to place a drip line in your lung to drain the blood."

"Blood?"

"Do you not remember anything, Sean?"

"Bits and pieces, flashes of things, but I can't tell what's real and what's just in my head."

"Let me tell you what all we treated," Ed replied, smiling devilishly, "See if that jogs your memory."

I nodded, slightly hesitant, chewing more of the ice.

"Blunt force trauma to the skull, causing a slight concussion, we drilled a small hole to release the pressure and swelling. You're lucky it didn't kill you. A dislocated jaw, the easiest thing to fix on the list. Two cracked ribs, a third rib broken, pierced your lung, hence the drip lines."

"The parking lot in the Old City, behind Barley's," I said, suddenly remembering all of the details, the passion, the pain, Cynthia laying beside me on the ground. Dr. Ed nodded as I tried to get the question out. "Cynthia, is she?"

Ed's face turned deathly serious as he nodded one last time, adding a certain creepy finality to it all.

"Multiple gunshot wounds to the body and head, numerous lacerations to the head, presumably from the same object that was used in the assault against you."

"Her husband did it," I replied, no other words would come, I turned my head and sobbed, her shattered face, stuck in my mind, smiling and bloody.

"Mr. Hart claims innocence, has a list of places he visited in New York the night in question. Witness list an inch thick, he returned to New York with her body, three days ago," Ed said, shaking his head at no one in particular. "The detectives are on their way, questions and answers are to be given. Talk to them, but leave him out of it. After they leave, we will talk again."

Chapter 10

Ed was right, the police came in, asked a lot of questions, gave only a few answers, stated that two suspects were in custody and the case, by their standards, was closed. I did as Ed said and left the parts about her husband out of it, ignoring the desire to correct them, argue for some semblance of justice for Cynthia. But the words would not come.

The two detectives left, the drip dropped again and again, I was in the mellow darkness again, the chords of Guns N Roses echoing in my mind. Dreams, dreams are things that we make in our own minds, our subconscious is trying to tell us something, at least that's what I've been told a time or two.

Well if that's the case, I really wish these dreams of mine would stop beating around the bush and come out and tell me what they have to say. Exhaustion from being awake so long had mixed with alcohol and left me there on the futon, in a sense of being I imagined to be like a good LSD trip.

All of the colors around me were brighter than normal, as if they had sucked in the sun's rays and glowed with majestic light. The grass seemed to be almost neon around me, the sand at the waters edge was golden and shiny like a mirage. The waves were crashing into the sand, each one shaped like a woman from my past, a hidden message behind wet symbolism.

The water a blue so clear that the foam was almost crystal clear. And the sky, not even blue, hues of green, orange, purple and yellow. A short gentleman in a red vest and black slacks offered me a silver tray with multiple cigars and a small bottle of tequila. I smelled through them all, picking the one that smelled the most robust.

The little bottle of Patron I carried with me, the cork left behind in the sand. I felt as if I had been walking for an eternity, searching for someone, something. The man produced a cigar cutter from thin air, as if by magic, and sliced away the end of the cigar.

I put it to my lips and he produced an expensive looking wooden match, striking it against his thumbnail. The cigar had the scent and taste of a true bonafied Cuban before it was lit, but when I took in the first pull of that delicious aromatic smoke, my senses said something entirely different. The taste I recognized was a Black and Mild with a

wooden tip. The man laughed as if reading my thoughts and pointed to my hand, which held one of the cigarillos, not the cigar I had chosen from his fancy tray.

I took this as a sign and continued to puff on the cigarillo and sipping from the little square shaped bottle while walking along the beach. I watched the waves, images of past lovers, caught in their crashing shapes, the foam welling up and reaching for me. I looked back to see if my friend, the server, was seeing this too, but he was gone, not even a footprint in the sand. I was alone on the beach. I felt exhausted, as if this journey was nearing its end, so I sat in the sand and watched the waves crash and the not exactly a sun orb in the sky sink on the horizon.

The colors seeming to blend together, waiting to set the ocean ablaze. The sand welcomed me, beckoned me to lay down so I did, watching the sky change colors before me like some secret solar storm nobody was supposed to see. The sand wasn't grainy, but soft, inviting.

I relaxed and let the dream truly take hold, the ground around me coming to life, massaging my tired flesh. I smoked the cigarillo and imagined it was her fingers caressing me, touching the tender spots in my muscles and rubbing them loose. I was like putty in her fingers, my flesh meshing and molding between her hands. The tide had risen, soft sprays cooling my hot flesh.

I looked up to see a woman of water, walking my way, naked and transparent. Her hair was made of the breaks bubbly foam, sitting atop her head like fluffy bulbs of cotton, as white as the clouds. She came to me, sat by my side and sipped from my bottle of tequila, I saw the fluid running down inside her and mixing with the water that was her shape.

She passed me the bottle and I sipped, long and hard, swallowing it all, tasting salt on the rim. I closed my eyes again and felt her watery touch on my flesh, caressing me, welcoming me into total euphoria as she touched and rubbed my chest and neck.

ACT II:
Innocence Lost
(Paradise Gained)

Chapter 1:

Then

The sound of flesh meeting flesh is distinctive, sometimes erotic, sometimes disturbing, sometimes painful. Belly's slapping in sensual dances of dark fantasies and horizontal games of pleasure, moans of excitement, breathless at times and joy in the air. Then there's the other side, open palms, meeting faces, knuckles smashing into jaws, bone grinding against bone in unholy symphonies of pain and abuse.

Maybe if I give you a little bit of background, a glimpse into my childhood, the things I witnessed, you will understand my desire to be a perfect man of the night and a true gentleman in the worlds oldest and best profession. Pleasure, for the almighty dollar for me, and peace and Ecstasy, for the women spending that dollar.

My mother was never a large woman, she was always, small, breakable, fragile. In her last years, before she truly withered away to almost nothing, those were the only times I remember her weight being over one hundred pounds. Don't get me wrong, she only ever reached maybe five foot one, like I said, small, fragile. Dark brown hair, reddish tint, always shoulder length, sometimes a little shorter. Streaks of gray began to appear in her twenties, peaking from the edges of her widows peaks, hair dye became a norm in her forties, and most of her days were spent alone in the end.

In her last months, weeks and days, my mother continuously apologized for things that happened in the past. Things I had forgiven her for, but could never forget. Moments that change the structure of a parent and child's relationship forever, creating a new dynamic and path that was not meant to be walked down. But such is life in this godless world of sex and drugs.

Want to know why I was so stricken with grief by Cynthia's murder? Do you need that one missing piece to grasp a hint as to why I felt that way I did? Fear not, for I am about to tell you.

At fourteen, I was a typical teenager, hating and distrusting all adults, trying cigarettes, lusting after girls and enjoying about five minutes of school every day.

Mom wasn't employed at the time, Richard kept her at home, cleaning, buying the groceries, on drugs and docile, submissive. But before I move forward, let's talk about darling Richard for a moment. Richard had charcoal black hair, a bushy Burt Reynolds mustache and slender features, flesh tight against muscle, not Arnold muscles, more the natural kind from working hard for many years in a physically demanding job.

Richard wasn't a tall man, maybe five foot ten, but that's paying him a compliment. To my small stature, he was a giant, strong, imposing, physically and verbally abusive in the home. At fourteen, I was maybe a hair under five feet. I had inherited my mothers physical stature and my fathers strong, good looks.

As I said before, my mother had a strong addictive bone in her body, Goody powder killed her, plain and simple, but Richards lifestyle helped her along the path. Before Richard my mother had loved her cocaine, weed just wasn't her thing. Heroin, thank God, wasn't her choice of vices either. One time, many years before that, I had witnessed her nearly overdosing on heroin, a boyfriend had lied and told her it was coke, like a fool, she grabbed a straw and took the line down in one quick snort. But that is a tale for another day.

Richard introduced her to crack cocaine, a cheaper, more addictive high that created a leash on my mother that would last most of her life, more to Richard than to the drug, well, until the son of a bitch died of cancer a few years ago. Richard was another breed of addict, he went to work at 6am, was off at 3pm, smoked a couple of joints, huffed a dose of smelling salts, cracked open his first beer and gambled on every sport of the season.

I can name a few instances in that year or two when he got physical with me, all over simple things. Punches to the stomach, kicks to the shins, slaps across the face. I had a taste of revenge, in a

way. The man bought all of his drugs in bulk, he was into pills even before that was really a thing. I used to take a bud here, two buds there and stuff it into a Newport 100, take them to school and sell them off for ten bucks a cigarette.

A lot of the rednecks at that school hated me because I dated women of color, but they swallowed it when they heard I had good weed at an unbeatable price. Mom and Richard lived together in a trailer park near the airport, and once I started pinching, people were picking me up to go eat and all kinds of different things. I enjoyed the revenge, it was just a little thing.

Chapter 2

It was late, not early morning quite yet, but after midnight when I awoke to the sounds of screaming at the front of the trailer. I was used to it at that point, Richard was off the next two day, so he and my mother would be partying hard until sunrise, rinse, repeat, and so on, until Sunday night.

"Shut up, Richard, just shut the fuck up!"

The voice from my mother was recognizable, rough and scratchy from an evening of heavy crack cocaine use and yelling over loud music that I was supposed to sleep through. His was a drunken roar, only fueled on with pleasure from the exchange, but then again, he was a sick man. Strands of rope were hidden under his bed, attached to the four legs, used for restraining others, currently, my mother.

I heard the wet THWACK of flesh meeting flesh and felt a soft tremor through the walls of a body hitting the floor, less than a tremor, more of a slight vibration. I tried to ignore it, but something lifted me up, out of my slumber, carrying me to the door, cracking it and peeping out.

My mother was pulling herself up from the floor, head bowed at the little island table in the center of the kitchen, a light shown above her, making her glow like an angel in the darkness.

Richard was somewhere in the darkness, just out of eyesight, panting, like a stalking beast in the jungle. Taking in the visuals in before me, I heard a constant tapping noise, like plink, plink, plink. The sound reminded me of a leaky faucet, but it wasn't water, it was my mother's blood, swelling to drops on the tip of her nose then falling, each one ruby red, to the counter top, never hitting the same spot.

"That'll learn you," he said, turning away from her, I saw his eyes reflect the light. "I'm going to bed, clean that shit up."

I heard him in the darkness, moving in my direction. I eased away from the door, but not fast enough. Richard was in the doorway, pointing something shiny at me. He flicked the light on, a fire in his eyes, a devilish grin on his face, all teeth. In his hand, a clean, polished, silver snub nosed revolver, aimed at my head, just above eye level. I could feel the pressure of it's cold metal against my skin.

"How would you like this, pointed at your head," he asked, slightly faltering before righting himself and adjusting the gun until it was inches away from my face, under my nostrils. He cocked the hammer back and stared at me, intently. "I asked you a goddamn question, kid!"

The moonlight sparkled on the curve of the barrel, the crazed look in his eyes intensifying.

"I guess, I wouldn't like it very much," I mumbled, trying to look past him, to see my mother there, ready to protect or attempt to defend me.

Richard squeezed the trigger, laughing as he did so, the hammer responding as he slowly squeezed it, my muscles tightening, my bowels loosening, warmth spreading from my crotch, down both thighs, the one second seeming to last forever.

The hammer clicked on a dry chamber, I let out my breath, hot and steamy, I hadn't realized I was holding it. Richard turned, still giggling, and walked out of my room, into the hall, towards his bedroom.

I stood there, shaking, trembling, piss running down my legs, cooling and pooling around my feet on the wood finish of the floor. My mother passed by the doorway without even looking at me, blood

dripping from her nose, her face swelling in places. She followed her master, her supplier into the bedroom without even speaking to me, closing the door behind her, without a glance back. I fell onto my bed, cold, alone, screaming into the pillow.

Chapter 3:

Now

When I awoke, Doctor Ed was standing across the room, a sinister grin plastered to his face, all teeth and red lips. He was humming a tune I recognized but couldn't put my finger on.

"Pleased to meet you, I hope you guess my name," he sang aloud, closing the door behind him. With a flick of the wrist, the blinds opened and the setting sun shone in, blinding me momentarily. When sight returned, Dr. Ed was standing above me. I could feel the medicine inside of me grasping at my mentality again. In reality, 17 years had passed since that night in the trailer. My mother had been gone almost three, but a few days ago, had been in the room with us, with my friends and this doctor.

"So, my young friend, are you ready to talk?" he asked me, his hand on my shoulder, the heat in his grasp warm and comforting.

The truth was, I wasn't ready to talk, I wasn't ready to think and organize my thoughts, I was lost, confused, afloat. Thoughts of Cynthia flashed through my mind like the still images from a movie. Her face aglow from an orgasm, her eyes wide, staring forth but seeing nothing, blood pooling around her head. My thoughts drifted through the waters of memory and emotion.

"How about you talk to me in a day or two, Doc?"

"Time for the mind to clear, the awareness to return. Wise choice, with what we have to discuss, you will want a clear head," Ed

smiled and nodded approvingly. He turned and left, drifting across the floor, almost as if he were floating.

I let the pain medicine run through the drip one last time, I would finish the night, pain free and swimming in my dreams, tomorrow, they would remove the drip and I would meet the demons inside, the pain and the thoughts head on. I tried watching television but all I seemed to find were infomercials for the newest turkey ovens and cheap knives that never went dull. On one of the stations, though, was a woman I knew, selling healthy alternatives, foods and oils.

Of course I remembered her, she was my first client, back when this life of mine had begun. You never forget your first. The way she smiled when she talked, the way she shyly neglected my touch at first. Technically it was all just a blind date, but she had left money on the dresser and that had given me the idea to go into this dirty business of sex and false hope.

*

A few years ago, before I lived in the Old City, I was still a constant visitor to Bristol's shop and Old City Java, had been for ages. Bristol was working the early morning shift when a shy, young lady named Amelia tried to sell him on her healthy foods that would also feed the starving kids in various third world countries.

In a moment of Bristol-like greatness, he recommended she give me a call, that I was more her market. Instead of contacting me directly, she found me on Black Planet, one of those websites like Facebook that never took off beyond the college crowd, sending a note to my inbox, suggesting we meet for coffee, at Bristol's suggestion.

I was in the process of walking back and forth across a set for a television show across Knoxville when the message came through, so I wasn't able to respond immediately. The set was for one of those

reenactment television shows that had slowly become the craze for lonely housewives and stay at home moms across the country. They were more relaxed than a, say Hollywood, production with their rules and regulations, but they kept a professional attitude.

At that moment, I was standing in a police line-up, a red herring for the real killer, two actors down, all sharp features and stylish hair, honestly looking nothing like the man the episode was based upon. I was about to send a reply with my phone number and directions to Old City Java, not realizing she had already been within walking distance earlier in the day when the director started talking.

“Sean, put the phone away,” he mumbled behind the glass window of the identification room. “We’re rolling here, buddy.”

Without reply, I slid the phone into my pocket, smiling and nodding. After thirty-seven takes of walking in, the lead fucking up his lines and walking back out, we wrapped up our morning scene for lunch.

*

I typed out the message three times before I was comfortable with my diction and spelling.

Hello, Amelia,

I am currently on set for a reenactment show here in Knoxville, they usually carry on until late afternoon. But I will be free this evening, Old City Java is usually pretty mellow at that time of evening, if you’re not busy, I would love to hear what you have to say, and with my current occupation, I’m sure I could find you a few more customers on set. Send me a phone number and I’ll see what we can figure out.

*Sorry For The Delay,
Sean*

*

I clicked the send button and proceeded over to her page, curious to what led her into Bristol's shop. The page was a basic design, the golden chocolate colors in a print you'd expect to find on fancy hotel blankets. The font was Sign Painter, curvy and jagged, the letters a faint yellow with black tint, an excellent choice but not very individualized. What I read in her biography was definitely a good, yet interesting read, if not too much to tell someone on their first meeting of you. Apparently she had followed a man across the country, expecting to be married soon after they arrived in East Tennessee, but he had left her pregnant and alone in the suburbs. He was floating around her somewhere, in the outer edges of existence, spending time with the child and then vanishing again for weeks at a time.

I clicked through her pictures, one by one, while eating a typical Knoxville set lunch of potato chips and a bottle of water. The lasagna and salads were reserved for the main cast and crew, extras were lucky to see chips and water on the table. Amelia's hair was long and natural, curly and kept up, caramel colored flesh with rosy lips and a seductive smile, eyebrows clearly maintained on a daily basis, thick and full but sharp at the edges. A little mole punctuated her beauty above her lips, just below her left nostril. The smile was full, leading into dimples inside her cheeks, the eyes, hazel with a hint of seduction.

When lunch was called off, we were sent back to wardrobe, to change sixteen more times, filming pointless sequences of faces in sunlight, pretend detectives screaming in faces, seven seconds filmed and the extra is replaced with another, a quick shot of detectives on the phone, a twenty minute lighting break, three minutes of footage filmed for slow motion narration segments about factoids that most people watching won't even pick up, twelve minute break for set change and wardrobe change, two cast members fuck in the changing room, another snorts a line of cocaine in the ladies restroom, one of the detectives pukes up a load of bad lasagna, suddenly an extra gets a raise and the rest of said detective's scenes will be filmed from behind with an extra in his place, two inches shorter, thirty pounds lighter.

Action is called and the true killer is stopped by the shemp detective, camera angled over his shoulder, his face out of focus, wrap is called and we are free to leave the set. I grab my shoulder bag, inside are three pairs of ripped jeans, two white t-shirts and two pairs of socks, one gray, one black. I hustle out the front door and call a cab, my destination: the Old City.

My cab is actually a van, red with brown interior, brown leather seats with red stitching and trim, the carpets are clean, but the smell of old french fries and tequila lingers in the air under the scent of Glade air freshener, possibly a mix of lilacs and lavender. I pray the scents don't stick to my clothes as I close the door on fresh air. The driver is a white male, pasty and pale, with greasy gray hair in a ponytail, skin tight against bones under a black tee shirt and blue sweatpants. It would be insulting to say he weighed more than 75 pounds soaking wet, sunken eyes in sun blasted cheekbones. Green eyes hidden behind sunglasses, yellow teeth tucked beneath cracked lips, a Marlboro Red hanging from his lips, the tip, an inch of ash at least.

"So, where you headed, bub," he asks in a gravelly voice, eyeing me above the glasses. "You an actor or something?"

"Old City Java," I reply, sitting my bag in the back. "Not really, just an extra. It's not a full time thing."

"We are on our way," he says, peeling out of the parking lot like the van is a drag racing speed wagon. His appearance is deceiving as he proves to be sharp as a tack, eyes watching the road, weaving through traffic like a trained professional. "Seems like a good job, though. You been in anything I might have seen?"

"A couple of episodes of this and that, mostly those re-enactment shows you see on the ID Channel."

"I don't really watch those, but my wife does. You think you can sign something before you get out? Might be a big star one day."

"Um, sure," I reply, grabbing his pen and notepad for trips and fees. I flip through to a blank page and sign my name in cursive, then as a footnote I add a list of the episode numbers I know by heart and sit the pad back down, feeling odd about the whole thing.

"Java, huh? That's the one across from Hannah's right?"

“Yeah, big cup of coffee on a sign out front.”

“I heard they have good grounds but the crowd is like the rest of that part of town.”

“And how is that?”

“A bunch of rich kids turning the whole art scene into a yuppie douche bag paradise.”

I chuckle and nod my head, feeling in my pockets for a pack of Marlboro 72s. I light one and enjoy the ride up the interstate from west Knoxville into Downtown, he takes the same route I would have chosen if I were behind the wheel, which let's me know he's one of the good ones, a decent driver on the up and up. We make small talk discussing his favorite television shows and him constantly asking if I have been on any of them. Every answer is no, but to him, local is major leagues, so I entertain him as much as possible, I check my phone to see if Amelia has responded yet. There is no reply, but Bristol has texted me, describing her as a cute little caramel drop that seems to be my flavor and that he has given her my number for her to spill out her little business proposal.

When we arrive at Java, the sun is setting, the crowds are thin, as expected for a Thursday night and Bristol has already closed the little boutique next door for the night. I toss the driver an extra five dollars for the good conversation and safe arrival at my destination and he thanks me for the autograph, which I consider worthless, but his wife will treasure for years to come. I grab my backpack and cross the street, lighting a Marlboro 72 as I walk, smoking it in the alley beside Java before entering. I stare across the street at the random green door there, a for rent sign hanging, as it has been for months, swinging gently in the breeze.

I open the door to Java and my senses are assaulted with smells of strong brews from Columbia, cooked fruits stuffed inside of pastries and the sounds of a record playing over the multiple invisible speakers tucked in various locations around the two roomed shop. Someone behind the counter has dug into the crates and is spinning a scratchy copy of The Beatles' "Magical Mystery Tour".

I glimpse into the back room, noticing that Amelia is already there, at the table by the window, watching the street lights click on,

one by one, across the street. She is sipping from a glass, appearing to be tea, lines of milk and honey floating inside the fluid. I return to the counter and order an espresso, which comes in a small brown cup, the foam is applied first, with the coffee on top, making a brown leaf atop a white background, the cup is placed on a small white plate with a tiny silver spoon and handed to me with a smile.

I clear my throat and Amelia turns to greet me, motioning for me to sit down. She stands until I am seated, allowing me the chance to take in the curve of her breasts, the slenderness of her hips and thighs and her height. Shorter than me, by four inches at least, the rest of her is as amazing as the photographs of her face. I think to myself as I sit down, the angels must have cried when this one was born. When she opens her mouth to speak, I am almost spellbound with the way her voice talks to me, her California accent thick like molasses, but sweet like the honey in her tea.

"I'm sorry I approached you that way," she says, smiling that grin from her photographs, the one that always guarantees a sale, I'm willing to bet. "Bristol, next door gave me your number, but I didn't really feel right reaching out to you like that. It felt awkward."

"It's fine," I said, sipping the hot caffeine infused beverage in front of me. The heat burnt my lips, the drink loosened my throat. "I'm used to random phone calls. I'm just a regular guy but these TV slots tend to lead me into other avenues of work. I'll meet another guy doing a show for fun and it ends up he runs a printing company across town and he needs help finding the right artwork for something. You could have called. If Bristol gave you the number, you're trustworthy enough for me."

Amelia laughed at that, her dimples on full display.

"So let me tell you about my campaign."

"Jumping right into it, huh?"

"Of course, that's why I messaged you."

I nod and let her continue how the foods she sells are all natural, some cleanse the body, some clear the mind and vacate the bowels, some taste awful and some taste like fresh vegetables plucked out of the dirt. The sales pitch doesn't really catch me, the other part is what let's me know she's a special kind of woman. Behind each purchase

is a trickle down system that feeds starving children in other countries, putting food in the bellies of little souls aching for nourishment not knowing where their next meal will come from.

"I need to introduce you to a few of my friends on-set and around the local scene. I'm pretty sure a few of them will be interested. Even if they don't eat the food, they'll buy it to feed those kids."

"Oh, you're poking fun now," she asks me, angrily. She starts to stand and gather her things. I reach across the table and grab her wrist gently, urging her to sit back down.

"I'm being serious," I say, releasing her and easing back into my seat. "These people are mostly showoffs, feeling like they're making Hollywood movies in Knoxville, but some of them have hearts of gold, and the others are always looking for a tax write-off."

Amelia sits back down and picks her tea back up, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Okay, the tax write-off part was a joke."

"Well, you have the table, Sean, so please continue."

I pull out a sheet of paper and make up a chart, describing the acting crowd, by rank and wage, by situation and capabilities, explaining each one on the fly, hoping that she will take me serious. I lay out a few jokes just to make sure she's paying attention, but otherwise I focus on the facts, the details in these peoples day to day lives. I never really realized how much of their information I had stored inside my head until I had a use for it.

At some point, I bought both of us, little baked dough strips that looked like bear-claws, but were filled with a strawberry paste and almond slices. The music had changed, Dido's "Life For Rent" album was playing somberly around us as I led the conversation away from business and into her personal life.

"So, do you think any of this will help?"

"Actually, you seem to know a lot of people with a lot of money, and at least one of them will want to invest in it."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, I don't know how much more talk about your acting friends I can take anyway."

"What's your middle name?"

“Yeah, you’re not getting the answer to that one,” she replies, blushing. “Why don’t you try again, with a better question. I don’t like my middle name and you won’t be seeing it unless you break in my house and steal my birth certificate.”

“I doubt it would be breaking in, if I were already there, with you.”

“You just throw it all out there, don’t you?”

“Why not? Worst thing that can happen is you say no, and say no again, until you say yes.”

“Who says I’m ever going to say yes,” she says, finishing the glass of tea and picking up the chart, folding it neatly and tucking it into her purse, a black leather handbag with golden etching along the trim and bronze colored handles.

“Touche’,” I reply, standing and moving behind her to edge the chair out for her to rise.

“Oh, and a gentleman,” she says, standing and laughing, turning to face me. I take in everything about her, pausing the moment in time. Her milky eyes more seductive in that moment, looking up at me, wondering what kind of nonsense will exit my mouth next. Her cleavage is concealed in a black button-up shirt, lacy edges on the sleeves, white buttons, every single one clasped. Her toned caramel legs in a pair of ladies suit pants, tight from the knee up, widening from the knee down, the tips of a pair of white Chuck Taylor Converses sticking out below the seam. Amelia stands on her toes and kisses my cheek, softly and politely, her semi-posh background showing through in a single moment. “I’ll call you in a few days to do this again. Don’t stay up waiting on me though, I’m a busy girl.”

I watch as she exits, the wind feels knocked out of my lungs, I can still smell her. I sit in her seat and ease my cup across the table, I run my fingers around the lip of her glass, faint traces of a champagne colored lipstick around it’s rim. I sip the espresso and watch her walk past the window outside. I count the steps, seeing if she will look back at me, almost out of sight, she does it once, a quick glimpse, almost a shrug, she catches my eye and walks out of frame.

Chapter 4

The nurse who removed the needles and tape from my arms the next morning was cute, thick and round with a friendly face and a soothing voice, promising to be as gentle as possible. Blood flowed back into the IV line as she slid it out of my arm, a couple of drops floating in the clear fluids, a little hole on the inside of my forearm swelled with blood until it formed a single drop, which ran down my arm and splashed onto the white sheets, finally bringing some color to the bright white room.

I smiled at the splatter and the design it made on the sheets, clearly the narcotics they had been pumping through me for nearly two weeks were still in my system. I laid back and turned the television on, with three dozen stations to choose from, there had to be something that would catch my interest. The nurse applied gauze and tape to both arms and patted my shoulder before leaving the room with a slow sashay of her round ass in those tight pants. I was loopy still, it may have been in my mind, but I would find out at some point.

I settled for a documentary on tribes down around the Amazon River, miles away from civilization but sporting ball caps and one little boy with an iPod. It saddened me for some reason, knowing that even those little villages in the middle of nowhere, free of illness, happy in their ways as they had been for thousands of years, were being slowly modernized, their ways and beliefs being destroyed by men and women of the cloth, forcing religion upon a people with their own faith. As the documentary, I began to pick up on little things in the background of the footage, some disturbing, some angering me.

A flash of an outhouse styled building, sitting on the edge of the water that not six feet away, children were swimming in, a little boy with a skirt made of some sort of leaves, legs bowed, but a Bic lighter in his hand, an older man sitting around a fire with others, men and women, but he caught my eye, a pair of Oakley sunglasses on his

forehead, a Marlboro in his mouth, his dick hanging out of another leaf and feather skirt, a woman beyond the crowd, saggy breasts hanging down to her belly button, red dot tattoos up and down her arms, pierced nostrils, eyebrows, earlobes, stick gauges through both nipples, another through her chin, her left arm, missing below the elbow, just bits of burnt flesh and scar tissue surrounding what looked like a polished piece of bone sticking from their center.

Cut to three men of the tribe sitting with a white man, not from the documentary crew, but a preacher, Christian judging by the verses he was reading aloud to them, the three men listened intently while passing photographs of American citizens who had donated money for him to travel here and share the word of God with them. He was dressed for the weather, but extravagant none the less, a Polo by Ralph Lauren white t-shirt with sweat stains in the arm pits, a golden chain with bulky cross around his neck, Rolex on his wrist, black leather band, silver frame and arms with a golden face, khaki shorts also from Ralph Lauren and leather sandals from some designer store in New York I had once ordered a suit from.

By mid-day the pain had began to throb, when the same nurse that had pulled the needles in the morning returned with my lunch, she asked if I would like something to help with the pain, I asked her name. I was swimming in pain, so I honestly cannot remember if she gave it to me then or later, but her name was Aurin, which would be explained to me later is an organic compound, forming yellowish and sometimes deep-red crystals with a greenish metallic luster. Her mother had a thing for the chemical tables and apparently had gotten pregnant while studying for a college test on the make-up of different elements on the tables. I do remember declining her offer for pain medication, requesting only a couple of Tylenol PMs. As my mind began to clear, the pain intensified to a point of gritting my teeth and wishing I would die. Once or twice I broke out into sweats from the agony.

More than once I caught Dr. Ed walking by, peeping in and coasting on down the hall, at my worst moments, I swear it sounded like he was laughing from the pleasure of my pain. Aurin returned in the evening, after dinner was served, with two Tylenol PM capsules

and a glass of chilly ice water. I took the pills down dry then swallowed the glass of water, enjoying the chill in my throat and chest. The numbing it caused in my jaws.

"I'm here til midnight, if you think you're capable, I can help you into the bathroom over there to take a shower, Sean," she said, watching me struggle to grasp at the world one grip at a time. "There's a bench in there, so you'd be able to sit up, wash yourself after I helped you inside, it might boost your spirits a bit."

I nodded, still taking water into my mouth, not wanting her to hear the fear of movement in my voice. I hadn't carried my weight or left the bed since I had arrived, I had seen movies where people had to learn everything all over again, but I hadn't been asleep for very long. I finished off the water and handed her the glass.

"How was I washed until now?" It had dawned on me, I smelt clean every morning, my face was carrying a slight beard, but otherwise I felt clean and whole, other than the pain, anyway.

"Sponge baths, dear," she replied, patting my leg. "I have given them to you a few times, then there's Michael, the night nurse, he has too."

Aurin noticed my eyes widening and laughed aloud. "It's okay, Sean. He's in medical school, not some random hired janitor. He treated it with professionalism, I am sure."

"I could care less about him, you've seen me in all of my glory," I replied, feeling a little chipper since the Tylenol was beginning to numb the dull throbs in my body. "And we haven't even had our first date yet."

Again Aurin laughed, shaking her head, her almond eyes, were warm and welcoming, her laugh contagious, her curves were thick and full, meaty in all the right places. I was almost aroused at the sight of her laugh, until I felt the catheter inside my penis disagreeing with me.

"If I take a shower, can we get this damn hose out of my dick?" I said, pointing at my crotch, suddenly aware of how raw and dry my penis felt.

"I'll have to ask one of the doctors, sweetie, but I'm sure they would rather you take a shower without it."

“Which doctor? That Doctor Ed fella?”

“Who,” she asked, looking confused, “there’s no doctor named Ed here, maybe you heard him wrong when he was talking to you. I’m sure that’s all it was. Since you’ve been here, you’ve called me Cynthia more than once, Mama a few times and a couple others that you’ve mumbled under your breath that I couldn’t really make out.”

After her statement, Aurin turned and left, again with the sweet sashay of ass, reminding me of Neicy Nash in her uniform on Reno 911, but Aurin didn’t have that chocolate complexion that Neicy did, her skin was more of a golden brown, her hair was shorter, neck length and straightened. But that ass, was something to behold from close or from afar, something I wanted to hold, to grasp and squeeze. First things first, I had to get out of this bed, let the healing begin.

I flipped through the stations, looking for the infomercials with that face I hadn’t seen in five years selling healthy alternatives. After about fifteen minutes, I found the station I was looking for and let the Tylenol do it’s magic on me, sending me into a peaceful slumber that almost felt natural. My mind drifted through the hospital, down the elevator and out onto the cool streets of Knoxville, shooting skyward at a rapid speed, my mind’s eye rested then, taking in the sights below me, before zooming off again, this time towards the Old City. I knew what was going to unfold before me, but I chose not to wake up with a start.

My mind’s eye shot rapidly down towards the concrete and stopped inches above the ground, falling with the rain, and glimpsed through the window of Old City Java, there I was, at that same table I always occupied, Amelia sat across from me, this time in a champagne pink skirt and white short sleeved button-up top. Two weeks had passed, we were talking. My mental image edged closer to the glass, attempting to let the conversation play out without having to relive the moment. I had a strange control over the moment and I wanted to stay on the outside looking in.

“So, did any of them pan out?” I asked, again with my back to the window, Amelia sitting across from me, looking as beautiful as she had the moment I met her. I was in a gray long-sleeved t-shirt, Fruit of the Loom, American Eagle jeans, stone-washed gray and white, with a rip on the left knee, threadbare stitching across the right, white ankle socks from Nike and a pair of gray Wallabee shoes from Clark's, with solid black soles, no boxers, no briefs. Tonight, she had on make-up, black mascara on her eyelashes, faded gray lipstick that could not hide the rosiness below, and hints of a silver blush, highlighting those beautiful cheeks and dimples. Amelia told me it was just another business meeting but when she arrived, I had a feeling something more was amiss.

“Actually, yes,” she replied, smiling. “One of the people at the film company signed me on as their caterer for snack bars, instead of the usual chocolate and Multigrain bars. They’re still going to have chips and soft drinks, but, as you said, the bars would make a good donation write-off. A few of the actors you warned me about, the ones that feel like Knoxville is mini-Hollywood, the gaggers, the gym nuts, they ordered year long trials, just to see how many calories they can lose without doing much more than looking pretty.”

“See, I told you, it was worth your time,” I replied, toasting her tea glass to a bottle of Perrier mineral water. I took a swallow of the water and let it fizz around in my mouth before swallowing.

“Yeah, that’s not all, a couple of others signed on, just for a sample kit, but that’s enough to feed a few kids, so I’m satisfied.”

“But, if this is strictly business, then why are you dressed so nice?” I asked, my eyes passing the edge of the table to look at her toned leg, wondering if it felt as creamy and smooth as it looked. She caught me looking and snapped her fingers, bringing my attention back to her face.

“I figured I owed you a drink, a real one.”

“Java doesn’t serve the good stuff,” I replied, checking the time on my phone. “But we could go across the street to Hannah’s, get a booth, order some real food.”

“I didn’t say anything about feeding your starving artist ass,” she replied reaching for her purse, allowing me a glimpse down the blouse, the curve of her breasts, bare and exposed, no bra. I tuck my phone into my pocket and check if the key Bristol borrowed for me is there, it is.

I grab my umbrella, a simple black one from Wal-Mart and lead her out into the rain. I crack open the umbrella before stepping out beyond the overhang at the front door. I pass the small umbrella to her, so she can stay dry and enjoy the cool misting falling from above.

Amelia leads the way across the street and up the single step into the yellow trimmed corner section of the building that will eventually become my home. Hannah’s is slow, as expected, a few couples are around the bar, a few single men and women at various tables, eating a greasy dinner and sipping a stiff drink, some are watching the sports event on the television, some are reading from the newspaper, the blonde bartender recognizes me and waves me and Amelia into a booth, again at a window, this time looking out across the street we just walked across, everything is a circle, I think as I sit in the booth, Amelia catches me off guard when she edges past me into the booth, sitting beside me and leaning against the cool glass.

I order a BLT sandwich, tomato on the side, bacon crispy and lettuce fresh cut and crispy, with a side of fried pickles and a Corona with lime, ignoring her looks of disbelief, she orders a chicken Cesar salad shredded provolone and crumpled blue cheese on the side, a cup of homemade buttermilk ranch dressing and a Corona, no lime.

While we wait on the food, Amelia and I make small talk about general topics, never getting too personal, never touching on our lives specifically, the rise and fall of the stock market, if Obama will make it through another four years, where and when he will reveal his birth certificate that we both agree will be an American one, real estate and the changes it’s causing here in Knoxville, in the past week alone, two more downtown buildings have been purchased so that they can be transformed into yuppie condos with prices no normal working stiff will

be able to afford, the University of Tennessee and it's amazing but ignored high rates of rape and sexual misconduct by teachers, how the campus is upgraded on a monthly basis, but the roads of East Knoxville are victim to washouts and the sidewalks so cracked in some places that miniature trees are growing through them, the number of homeless people that are murdered yearly by the police and tossed into the Tennessee River, the number that aren't tossed into the river, the corrupt governments of Knox County and neighboring Blount County, the hidden gambling rooms that remind one of the speak easy juke joints of the 50s and 60s, the men who gamble there and are never caught, judges and lawyers and elected officials, the coming fall and the past summer, we discuss it all and both manage to drink two Coronas each.

When the food is delivered, I order two Long Island Teas with the good shit from the top shelf, not the garbage they pump through taps behind the counter, the bartender laughs and walks away to mix the drinks. Amelia nods approvingly before mixing the contents of her salad, adding sprinkles of one cheese and then the other, so that the whole healthy concoction is evenly spread for each bite.

I sprinkle salt onto the tomato and check the crispiness of the bacon before pinching off a piece of the lettuce and cracking it apart, water droplets spreading on my fingers, I build my sandwich while watching Amelia eat her salad, slowly chewing up each bite and swallowing before picking up another, the Iced Teas arrive and the bartender waits as I sip mine, a strong punch to the throat, a ginger burn all the way down, I nod approvingly.

The Tea is strong and loosens both of our tongues, two more eventually arrive and conversations lead to personal matters and affairs of the heart. We discuss our last relationships, hers being the father of her daughter, mine, a student at UT that graduated in the spring and traveled on to John Hopkins Hospital to complete her courses and attempt to get tenure there, we discuss her child, young, bright and smart, sharper than a tack, her family back home, how she misses them but doesn't want to travel down the same paths they did, so she chooses to stay in Tennessee hoping to convince some of them to move east in the near future, we discuss my childhood, my

younger years, attempts at music and band management, my experiences working in shops around the area, the year I spent homeless on the streets of the city so I could truly feel at one with it's magic essence.

After the salad and sandwich are gone, I tell her if she's driving, she has had enough and Amelia laughs at me, ordering two more, she tells me the same, I tell her I'm calling a cab, she leans back against the front window, my frame blocking her from the building crowd inside of Hannah's, she spreads her thighs, the dim lights of the bar enhancing shadow, revealing flesh that was soft, welcoming, one leg propped up, the other on the floor, revealing all, a small bush, trimmed, short, manicured, a pair of rounded lips, a bit of labia peeking out at me, playing hide and seek, Amelia grinned at me, sipping her Tea through a straw, she looked past me, seeing nobody watching she took an ice cube from one of the emptied glasses and ran it along her thigh, between her legs, with the tip of her index finger she pushed it between her lips, a shiver escaped her lips, a tremble of her thighs. She took a pull from my Long Island Tea and kissed me on the lips, passing the liquor from her mouth to mine before sitting back, she turned back to her ladylike pose and we continued talking as if nothing had ever happened.

Even though I was a little shocked, I did my best to be a gentleman, this one was out of my reach, even with her teasing play, she was a woman out of my league. She knew this and so did I, small talk was made, long conversations were made, the drinks made eyes heavy and desire strong. Amelia slid closer to me, kissing my neck, rubbing against my jeans, I pulled out my wallet and covered the meal and all but two of the drinks, Amelia giggled and paid the fee for the other two, we stood together, forgetting the umbrella and walked out into the rain, not feeling it's wet chill, not caring, she pulled me close on the brick wall and started to kiss me as people walked by, I eased away after whispering for her to follow me. We walked two doors down to the green steel door, neither of us knowing what was behind it and I eased the key out of my pocket while she shivered against my back, the heat of her breath making it hard to think, I unlocked the door and it opened inward to an old wooden staircase, chipped and

splintery, Amelia asked if it was mine, I shook my head, shutting the door behind her, darkness surrounded us, her white shirt glowing in the darkness, her breasts showing through the wet material, two dark centers with hard tips poking out of the fabric, I licked at the material, taking one of her breasts into my mouth, sucking on it through the fabric, rainwater quenching my thirst, I caressed her thighs, deciding all of my thoughts were correct about how amazing they would feel, how soft but firm they were, Amelia gasped and pulled me close, one hand running over my shaved head, the other caressing my ass through my jeans, I found the heat between her legs with my free hand, warm liquid met my hand when I spread her lips, felt along her labia, a small clit wrapped in it like a present, I rubbed there, pressed and teased, Amelia kissed my neck and bit me there, soft, gentle, I opened her labia and pressed my fingers inside her fleshy opening, an instant later I was inside of her body, motioning her closer with my fingers.

I dropped to my knees and took her into my mouth, my tongue guiding the way, her hands pulling me close, her flower spreading for me, I took her ass cheeks into my hands and rubbed them, squeezed them, massaged them as I sucked on her womanhood, her pussy dripping on my tongue, I quenched my desire to taste her and almost drowned in the sweet juices that were there, hints of liquor in their flavor from the alcohol in her system, I felt the wooden floor digging into my knees, but I didn't care, splinters were finding homes in my flesh, but I was oblivious to the pain, this woman before me, her pleasure was all that I had on my mind, she banged the back of her head on the door, cried out my name, cried out to the Lord above and pushed me away. Amelia kissed my lips again, sucking her juices from my lips and licking at the lines of my tongue before turning and pulling the door open without saying a word.

Chapter 5

When I wake up, Aurin is standing over me smiling, holding my shoulders, I'm confused, pressure is on my penis, and then, yanking, pain, like a thick wooden q-tip sliding out of my hose, I grit my teeth and in a matter of seconds, the pain passes. Aurin releases me and stands back, that male nurse is standing between my legs, waving a yellow tube back and forth and nodding at me, I realize what has just happened and almost pass out again, before Aurin speaks to the male nurse.

"Everything come out okay, Michael?"

"Yeah, was a long pull though, our friend here is rather gifted," he laughs to himself as he rolls up the yellow hose and leaves the room, catheter and piss bag in hand.

"Sorry, Sean," she says, patting my shoulder, "I'm not allowed to remove those apparently."

"It, it's fine," I breath through gritted teeth. "Can we bring the bed up to a sitting position, so maybe I can attempt to take a shower. I feel clean from your fantastic sponge services, but I'd really like to scrub myself, if at all possible."

Aurin nods, clicking the button on the side of the bed, increasing the incline, bringing me up slowly into an upright position, she walks across the room and closes the door, then returns and drops the sidebar, standing ready to catch me if I fall.

I spin sideways, so that my legs are hanging off the edge of the bed, and she offers a hand. I take it and attempt to stand, unsuccessfully. My legs were like jelly, that feeling when a limb is asleep multi-fold, that tingling of pins and needles, I collapsed into Aurin's arms and was lifted up, my arm draped over her should and shuffled weakly towards the little bathroom, she untied the neck of my gown and let it fall to the floor before easing me onto the bench in the little shower stall.

"How hot do you want it?" she asked, fidgeting with the dial, while trying not to look back at me, I glimpsed down at my body, feeling weak from the small exertions of attempting to walk ten steps, I was weak, I was tired, but I was alive and only I could change these things.

“All the way up,” I replied, covering my manhood with one hand, embarrassed at how skinny my arms and legs were, they had shrunken so much in just a few weeks, I was ashamed. “Just crank it up until I say stop, please.”

“Okay, Sean, but don’t overdo it, alright?”

I nodded weakly and eased my head back onto the cool tile wall, waiting on the water to hit me, the heat to singe my flesh and make me call out, but when the jets and streams of water splashed against my skin, there was no pain, no agony, just relief and a cleansing feeling that I had not felt in ages, in years. Aurin pulled the curtain closed and sat down on the toilet seat outside, a trooper she was, clearly her shift was over.

“Hey, lady,” I called, reaching into the heat and steam for a wash cloth and the bottle of liquid body soap this particular health facility chose to carry. “Why do you care so much?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you care so much,” I repeated myself, “your shift has to be over by now.”

“I know who you are, Sean,” she replied, “some of the others here may not, but I do. You have brought joy to friends of mine, to people I see in the streets every single day. Some of them have only met you once and they still shine and glow like it was just yesterday. How would I look? If they knew I was here and didn’t take care of Sean, the man from the Old City?”

I scrubbed my body, pondering what she had said, my thoughts wondering through women, customers and regular lovers, friends and business acquaintances, wondering who exactly she meant. I cleansed my body of the sweat and dead skin that comes from laying for so long, the nurses did their best, but I scrubbed deeper, around my balls and taint, across my shaft, tender to the touch, possibly from a tube that seemed a mile long, only removed moments before.

“I’ll take that,” I replied, “but what’s in it for you, in the end?”

“We’ll just have to see, won’t we?” Aurin pulled back the curtain and I used her arm to lift myself, my legs working a little better than before I had sat, she towed me off, eyeing my crotch, smiling, thinking I hadn’t noticed but I did, I smiled inside, she was gentle

drying me off there, gentle but thorough, though it ached, her hands aroused me, which I think she felt through the towel, because she stopped then, stood and helped me into a clean gown, instead of a weak shuffle I actually limped back to the bed.

Aurin helped me get situated and tucked me in, slipping me another Tylenol PM. I took it dry and she used the controls to ease the bed back into a horizontal position, she patted my shoulder, smiled and left, again with a sweet sashay of the ass, waving as she quietly closed the door.

I turned on the TV and cruised the channels, looking for nothing in particular, my mind on Cynthia, for just a moment, but the moment was enough to draw sobs from somewhere deep inside, I flicked the television back off closed my eyes, wet with tears. I laid there, that way, awhile, on my side, eyes closed and crying, whispering her name over and over as if the simple action would bring her to me, make the images in my mind a reality. Had I caused her death, was I to blame?

Sometime after five in the morning, I nodded off to sleep, a restless slumber of dark images and gothic symbolism.

*

The mind is a funny thing, dreams are an attachment of the subconscious, their design and process, filled to the brim with life, memories, secrets that we feel inside but do not know ourselves in our waking lives, these are the worlds we create in our minds, these are the images shown to us in a state that we will no doubt forget by the time we make it to the bathroom to rid ourselves of the bile and waste in our bowels. The brain is such a massive computer that it designs these dreams from scratch, populating our minds with streets and roads, buildings and worlds, only to be destroyed when we wake.

I welcomed the darkness, welcomed the sensation of falling at the speed of sound towards an island in the darkness, and even though everything was dark, the island was lit up like noontime on a glorious summer day, men and women with bronzed skin, collecting rays from a sun that was not visible, but if I looked up, it would be

there, I slammed into the sand, sending up a cloud of the grainy particles around me. The beach looked familiar, but not quite, kind of like a foreboding sense of déjà vu, I remembered then, the beach from previous dreams, water women and sand servants, but this time the area was populated with regular people.

Some of them looked familiar as I stood, dusting myself off, some of them were just out of regular sight, fuzzy around the edges, darker at their center. Somewhere down the beach was my destination, I had no idea how I knew this, I just knew, as if some presence there was calling me, beckoning me to come, join it in the thunderstorms that were there. I let my feet guide me, my eyes checking the faces of these people, these glorious men and women around me in the sunlight. I chanced a look towards the sky and saw blue clouds and a golden sun. The sand was warm under my feet, grainy, digging into the flesh of my toes.

I noticed things as I walked down the beach, the men and women were all naked, as was I, their bodies, golden brown to creamy chocolate, some were tans, some were the tones they were born with, but everyone seemed happy, every time my feet carried me near one of these ladies or gents, I would blink and they would vanish with a pop, as if one moment they were there, the next, they were gone.

Also, the water was clean, clear blue, large species of fish, visible even at the edge of this mental world of mine, the air was clean, the only corruption, the only darkness was at the end of the beach, a rocky cove covered in moss and shadow, the clouds were packing together there, stokes of lightening showing me movement in the darkness, maybe it was just my eyes, but I think not. As I came closer to the cove, I began to sweat, goose-flesh was upon me like a sickness, the electricity from the clouds making the tiny hairs on my arms rise on end.

I wanted to stop, to turn and run back to the beach, with the men and women, to enjoy the warmth of the sun, to have conversations about life and the meaning of it all, but my arms too, had a mind of their own, reaching out and grabbing the first mossy stone, working with my legs, lifting me up, up and over the stone. I tumbled down the other side, into a shallow pool of warm water, hidden in the shadows

of the clouds, my legs scraped in the fall, my hands aching and raw, I looked over my shoulder, the stones, now boulders, blocking the way back into the sunshine, the way back to salvation.

I was being led to a destination unknown, when all I wanted was to turn and run, to scale the cliffs where only moments ago, stones had been, to not see this nightmare through. A bend led me out of the shallow pool and up onto dry land, a patch of sand, golden even in the increasing darkness, surrounding a dirt filled rectangle. I dropped to my knees there, not wanting to pull up the dirt, not wanting to find what was hidden in my subconscious, but I knew there was nothing to do at this point, if I refused, my body would just work on it's own, digging at the spot, opening, exposing the truth there. I looked around in the sand for a sharp, smooth stone to dig with, a stick, anything that would make the process easier, but there was nothing.

I started to dig into the dirt, amazingly, it was thin, powdery like the sand, coming up by the handful, without any effort at all, for what seemed like hours I dug into the earth. I wiped across my forehead, smearing dirt across the outside of my hands, mixed with sweat, but it looked like blood, red and wet, fresh and glistening. I realized then, the red material I was digging in, was not dirt at all, but blood stained sand, deep into the earth it went. When I reached a depth of my shoulders, I sat back and sighed, hoping for the rain clouds of my dreams to return, to cool me, to rinse my flesh of this red terror, that now, must have me looking like a macabre beast clawing his way out of the earth.

I slammed my fists down in frustration and struck something solid, something made of ancient wood. I frantically swept away the red sand, hoping that what I found was a metaphor and not another body, another excuse for me to suffer even more, another hidden skeleton that I had buried deep inside.

I fully exposed the top of the box, revealing a dark oaken box similar to a casket, etchings in it, some ancient and evil script I had never seen, but my blood ran cool, I wanted again to climb away from the hole, to lay down and cry until I awoke in my hospital bed, miles away, safe, secure.

My hands gripped the edges of the box, pulling, lifting, exposing the darkness inside, the top was thrown to the side, light came from the darkness, welcoming me, beckoning me to be one with it, I tried to resist but again my body decided this was the proper path to take. I leaned in, a flash of lightning revealing what lay there in the blend of shadow and light. A scream, bloodcurdling and mannish, escaped my lips, before I sank to the ground, weak, tired, exhausted.

Laying there, in the box, looking peaceful and serene, was not Cynthia or a past love, but me, dressed in a fine suit of black silk, with red trim and white buttons, dead and in a box, but alive and looking down upon it. I do not know how long I lay there, sobbing, wishing I would wake before a voice came from above me, letting me know, this was the only outcome that I could expect, the only road I was going to be able to follow, if I were going to see this through.

“Sean, a time is coming,” the voice in the clouds said, “where you will have to decide, to have justice or just be, to have redemption or be reminded, to sacrifice or be that sacrificial example.”

Anything less cryptic would have made sense of it all, instead, I just had another puzzle to solve and another angle to consider. Neither of these options made much sense then and there, but I was certain, soon all would be revealed.

Chapter 4

I woke up with a jump, gasping, reaching out, to the empty white hospital room. I eased myself out of the bed and slowly scooted my feet to the bathroom, taking my time as I went, I was exhausted by the time I reached the toilet, but I made it there, I had to sit down to piss, but I had made it across the room alone, it was a start, a small one, but a start, none the less. I slowly stood when I finished, looking at myself in the mirror, all of the bruising on my face had faded except a

few purple splotches on my jaw, thick, brown hair had created a bush on my face, I wanted to cut it away, shave it down, reveal the scars and damage underneath, but with barely enough strength to walk to and from the bathroom, I didn't have the faith in my abilities to do it myself, I would wait until Aurin returned in the evening and have her do the honors.

I lurched back to the bed, doing my best to remain vertical, and sat down heavily, exhausted, out of breath, ready to pass back out. When breakfast was served, I forced myself to eat all of it, drinking down a glass of orange juice and a glass of ice water as well. When my stomach settled, I sat in the visiting chair and watched a television show about the addiction to prescription medication in east Tennessee as I did leg lifting exercises, working to regain my strength, earning it.

Thoughts of Cynthia helped me, made me angry when the pain began, thoughts of her husband made me push through it, do another couple reps, lift my legs and extend them another ten times, before falling back into the chair in a sweaty heap. The words of the dream were in the back of my mind, wanting an answer and a resolution.

When lunch came, a surprise came with it, Bristol and Essence were there, as well. I was weak, tired and needed help getting back into the bed, but it was a pleasant surprise, none the less. I tried to be warm and welcoming, Essence was an emotional wreck as always, still assuming I would drop dead at any moment, her round breasts, rising and falling between sobs. Bristol on the other hand, palmed me an electronic cigarette, menthol, but something to chew on at least. The little black stick was nice, when I inhaled the tip turned blue, hence the name, Blu.

"Have they said anything about letting you out?" Essence asked.

"Not yet, but most of the injuries were internal, so I'm pretty much capable of checking myself out anytime. I'm in no rush, just yet, In a few days, if they don't release me, I will be leaving on my own accord. I have things I need to do first."

"You sure you're ready for that, buddy," Bristol chimed in.

"Probably not," I answered, turning to face him. "Can you do me a few things, today or tomorrow, Bristol?"

“Whatever you need, buddy,” he replied, “except a kidney, I pretty much fried that during the tours.”

“Nothing that serious,” I answered. “Can you hand me that pen and pad, Essence?”

I took the pad and made a list of my bills and their account numbers, the location of my biggest cash stash at the apartment, and passed it off to Bristol. He read through the list and looked back up at me, nodding.

“I really don’t think I have to worry about getting evicted, but I don’t really wanna get out to discover I have no lights.”

“It’s okay, man, you don’t have to explain anything,” Bristol said, tucking the paper into his jean pocket, which were black leather today, in pure punk metal fashion.

“Do either one of you remember any of the doctors you talked to when I first got here?”

“I remember one of the nurses, Aurin, I think. But I haven’t spoke to any actual doctors,” Essence said. Bristol nodded in agreement.

“I talked to one of them in the hall the first day, but I don’t remember her name,” Bristol said.

“The doctor was a woman?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “she was cute, but I can’t remember her name, blonde, big tits.”

“Manners, Bristol,” Essence chimed in, shaking her head.”

“What? She had boobs that looked like she paid for school with them.”

I laughed out loud but inside was so confused. I remembered Dr. Ed talking to them both when I first came out of the coma. I really had no idea what was going on and it bothered me. I grabbed my side, a sharp pain cutting off my laughter.

“Are you sure about checking yourself out?” That was Essence, back in concerned mode.

“I’ll be fine, besides if I have any problems, you can nurse me back to health at night and Bristol will be across the street during the day.”

Essence took my hand into hers and squeezed it, the look of concern still in her eyes, she tried to smile at me, then released my

hand and turned away, looking to the window and the noonday sun. She was worried about me, for my well-being. I felt bad for her, always concerned, always alone. The sickness inside her was eating her to the bone, swallowing her bit by bit, and she was worried about me.

“Can y’all come back later, or tomorrow?” I asked, suddenly having the desire to be alone. Essence knelt and kissed my cheek, something she had done since the first time we met, when she was alone in a hospital room, years ago. Bristol pumped an enthusiastic fist in the air while protesting loudly, “We’re going back to Pussyville, brother,” before turning to leave.

His announcement made me laugh myself into another fit until again the pain pulled at my insides. As they left, I relaxed back into the bed, knowing my bills would be paid, made me rest a little easier, as the day went by, the pain once again began to intensify, Aurin came onto her shift, pleading with me to take a pain pill. After dinner, I accepted Tylenol PM and smiled softly as the pain was reduced to a dull throb. I drifted off to sleep early in the evening with a clear mind, emotions pure and rich with feeling.

*

Flashes of dark imagery flooded my mind and danced around my mind like little demons on pogo sticks. Still images on a worn out film projector, melted around the edges with a dusty film over them like a photograph lost in the corner of the attic recently discovered.

Blinking lights and dance music in the distance.

Voices overlapping and laughter in drunken joy.

A black car with rental plates.

Guns N Roses coming through cracked windows.

Moans of pleasure from a woman loosed from entrapment.

A chain-link fence, creaking, matching the motions.
Gunshots.
Glass shattering, the sounds of bullets meeting flesh.
Warm pavement.
Hot blood.
Cynthia staring at me, through lifeless eyes.
A crowbar in a downward motion, towards the lens.
Pain, in the form of a burst of light.
A glimpse of Ed laughing
A close-up of Cynthia's face.
Her husband's face.

Then the loop began to travel in reverse, even slower, pausing at certain moments, speeding up at other ones.

It began again and repeated itself, hundreds of times, before I woke up, sweaty and crying, early in the morning hours. The room was shrouded in darkness, Aurin was asleep in the guests chair, Dr. Ed was standing above me, grinning.

Chapter 7

Ed was sitting on the edge of the bed, grinning at me, a sinister grin that told me more than I would ever need to hear, but I would listen anyway.

"You're not real, Ed," I said, kicking him gently in the ass, making him stand upright, losing the grin.

"I am as real, as anyone here, Sean," he said, his voice still carrying the seductive twang of a professional salesman and con artist. "I am as real as you, as real as that young woman asleep over there."

"No one has seen you or talked to you, except my mother, who is dead, and me," I replied. I brought the Blu up to my lips and sucked in

the cool menthol vapor, staring at him, waiting for a valid response. I exhaled with a sigh, still waiting.

“Sean, how would you like to pay a visit to the man who put you in this place? The gentleman that led Cynthia to hers?”

“That, that’s not possible,” I stuttered out.

“Oh, Sean, but it is,” he replied, laughing, I glimpsed over at Aurin, she stirred a little, but did not wake. He pulled a rolled cigarette from thin air and lighting it with a snap of his long slender fingers, the thin tendrils of smoke drifting across the room. “Anything is possible, for the right price.”

“Yeah, OK,” I replied, turning away from him, staring at the line of smoke drifting from his cigarette forming impossible shapes at the ceiling before vanishing to a vent there.

“Do you need proof, my boy, I won’t be offended,” he said, his voice, soothing and seductive.

“Maybe they snuck some pain meds into my system and I’m imagining all of this, but sure, Doc, prove it to me, I said, sarcastically.

“Where would you like to go, Sean?” he said, stubbing the cigarette out on his tongue and slipping it into his coat pocket.

“What?”

“Where would you like to go, first place that pops into your mind, it’s not a hard question, son.”

I thought about it, laughing inside that I was even pondering this mans delusions, considering he was possibly an image in my own mind, then I thought of the beach from the dreams, the one that existed in my mind.

“I don’t know, Doc, a beach?” I said, expecting him to flip the television to an episode of Baywatch or pull out a book with pictures of beaches. Ed snaps his fingers and time slows down, no, correction, stops.

One moment we are in the hospital room, the next, a shimmering beach, the same beach from my dreams, but real, with golden sands and clear blue seas. Ed looks at me and winks, smiles, motions for me to walk towards the water. I’m nervous about my legs giving way before I reach the crisp, foamy water of the ocean. I take a step

forward and feel the hot sand under and between my toes, grains wedging there, both gritty and gratifying at the same time.

"We're really here, Sean," he whispers, "well, you are. You can talk to these people, touch them, they'll remember a conversation with someone, but your face will be a blur, like the sun was over your shoulder, blinding them."

"How is this even possible," I ask, collapsing to my knees at the edge of the water, it's cool chill shocking me with it's reality, the beach falters for a moment, the hospital room glimmering through like a mirage. "Wait, Ed, what was that?"

"A glimpse at another time, in another place. The hospital room where your body still lays. This is not your body, Sean, just your conscious being. Your essence, your soul, if you will."

I struggled to my feet, the weight of his words confusing me, I walked along the edge of the cool, blue waters and felt the foam of the wake splash against the ankles and shins of this borrowed body as if it were my own, the sun beating down on this borrowed flesh.

"So if this isn't my body, then whose is it?" I asked, standing there at the oceans edge, taking in the beauty of a borrowed moment, looking across the waters at the statue of Christ standing on a mountain in the distance, I was in Rio De Janiro, Brazil, believing it not possible, but feeling it, deep inside.

"Just a borrowed vessel," he replied, from somewhere inside me, "is the best way to describe it."

"That's not enough of an answer for me, Ed," I responded, walking out into the water, up to the waist at this point, feeling the balls tighten and shrivel at the cool grasp of the water,

"Are you asking me if you're inside of another human being or if this is all an optical illusion?"

"Sure," I replied, enjoying the cool ache of the water and the screaming of the muscles in my legs, the sun beating down on me.

"The body you are filling, is real, as real as yours, back in that hospital bed. This man's mind is on a brief vacation. Maybe he drank a little too much last night, maybe he is on the verge of an overdose. The best way to describe it, imagine everything you know about

persons with multiple personalities. You have the controls right now, his mind is asleep.”

“So if I walked out into the water and drowned?”

“This man would die.”

The impact and weight of his words hit me hard in the chest, like a ton of bricks.

“If I were to go to her husband in New York? If I were to say, shove him in front of a taxi?”

“The vessel would not remember the crime, no fingerprints would be left behind, video cameras will have distortion.”

“Can anybody be a vessel?”

“What do you mean, Sean?”

“If I were to come up with a particular description, could you find a match?”

“I’ve never been asked that question before, Sean, you truly are a rare breed.”

“Well, could you?”

“I suppose, I could, yes.”

I pondered this response for a long time, enjoying the way the sun felt on my flesh, the way the light glistened on this bronze skin I was stored inside of, the coolness of the water, the voices on the beach, families and lovers enjoying themselves. And then I felt a strong tug and saw nothing but darkness.

Chapter 6

I opened my eyes, Aurin staring at me, concern in her face, she was shaking me, I realized I was choking on water, my cup in my hand, but the water in my lungs was salty, warm, like the water of the ocean I had just been in, the bed around me wet, with sweat and

warmth. My air passage cleared when a mouthful of harsh, salty water came up out of my throat and splashed down on the white sheets, I could feel tiny rivers of it running through the long hairs of my recently grown beard, tears were in my eyes, Aurin patting me on the back. When my breath returned to normal, I looked up at her with bloodshot eyes, a questioning look on my face.

“What, what happened?” I asked her.

“You must have fallen back asleep, sipping from the cup of water you asked me to fetch.”

“Wait, I didn’t ask for...” I trailed off, thinking of how Ed had explained the vessel and the body, realizing that here, in the hospital, my body must have been on some kind of auto-pilot, responding to questions, making basic gestures. It made some kind of crazy sense that I did not like.

“Are you okay?” she asked, using the edge of the sheet to dry my face before pulling it away and throwing it into a bin for soiled garments. I noticed grains of sand at the foot of the bed, little golden specks on the white sheets. I kicked them away before Aurin returned to the bed, I felt as if I looked like I had seen a ghost and she must have seen it in my face. “What is wrong?”

“I, I saw a reflection of myself in the television,” a clear lie, seeing as how the television was across the room, mounted near the ceiling. But she took it in with a nod and patted my shoulder. “Can, can you help me before you leave?”

“Honey, I’ve been off a few hours,” she replied, “what’s a few more minutes going to hurt?”

“Can you get this damned carpet off of my face?” I asked, looking at her hopefully, knowing she would probably say yes.

“Um, sure,” she replied, offering me her hand, I gently pushed her hand away and stood on my own, my legs holding their own weight, feeling in that moment, like a god more than a man, I took one step towards the bathroom, then another, alone, on my own. But when I reached the toilet, I collapsed on the seat in a heap. I let out a sigh of defeat and turned so that she could see my face. Aurin looked like a proud mother, watching her child take it’s first steps.

“But, how?”

“I’ve been having to use the restroom, and that bedpan, well, it’s not very comfortable, so I’ve been going back and forth, on my own.”

“Sean, that’s not very safe.”

“I’ll be alright, Aurin, I’m checking myself out tomorrow anyway,” I answered, “so it’s not as if it will be a lawsuit or anything.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I nodded my head then turned my chin upward as she used a washcloth to first wet my whiskers then a pair of small scissors, sharp and shiny, to trim them, she used the washcloth again, nervous, I could tell, by how much she was talking, telling me about herself, her husband, her friends, the stories she had heard about me, lathering up my face with a scented shaving cream, when she came at my face with that single bladed Bic razor, I caught her hand.

“Yeah, that’s not going to work,” I said, a serious look on my face. “There’s a wallet in my belongings, can you take some money from it and go down to the gift shop, pick up a decent razor, please? I’m sorry if I’m asking you to do too much off the clock.”

“No, it’s fine,” she replied, smiling. “I really don’t mind. And I don’t blame you, I wouldn’t want to shave with one of these damned things either, they pull more hair than they cut anyway.”

As she turned to leave, once again, the sashay of the ass, I felt the rise inside me again, but this time, it wasn’t painful, when I heard the door to my room close, I lifted the gown and checked on the condition of my penis, it looked healthy in it’s little robins nest of hair, I’d trim all of that myself at a later date, I thought to myself, laughing, wondering how she would respond to that request. The head looked a little bruised, probably from that damn catheter tube, but otherwise, it was as long and thick and veiny as I remembered. Damn near flawless, beautiful and elegant.

When Aurin returned, I was still admiring my money maker, I tried to pull the gown back across my legs before she entered the bathroom, but it was pointless, a sharp pointed tent was waiting there, greeting her. She just shook her head, blushing, basically the same thing I was doing. She opened the razor and turned the hot water back on, running the razor under it.

“It’s a natural thing, I guess,” she said, her eyes drifting back down to my crotch before crouching in front of me and sliding the razor down the side of my face. I just remained silent, my eyes closed, picturing the razor slipping, magically pulling my throat open and covering her in hot, red blood, ruining her nurses scrubs. I felt my dick soften and sighed with relief.

“At least we know it still works, right,” she said, rinsing off the blades and coming in for another set of runs down my rough face. I nodded and let out a small grin, not sure what to make of the statement. “Maybe one day you’ll be able to show me what all the fuss is about.”

I opened my eyes to a full view of her round breasts down the blouse of her scrubs, thick and juicy, golden caramel just like the rest of her, I could feel another rise and looked away, closing my eyes again. I felt like a teenager who had discovered his first erection, it was embarrassing in a way, but also stimulating.

“I’d hate to have to tell my friends that your magic stick could no longer perform great wonders.”

I laughed quietly at that, trying to hold it in, so she didn’t nick my throat, seeing as how she was actually shaving my throat now.

Aurin finished and tossed the razor in the sink, rinsing the washcloth with hot water before wiping away the left over gunk, grayish shaving cream mixed with short hairs, a hand towel was heated with water next, drained of excess water and laid over my face as she cleaned out the sink and wash cloth, she massaged my face with her fingertips, opening the pores and releasing the leftover chemicals there, making my face tingle and burn. It was the most amazing sensation I had felt since this whole ordeal had begun.

Aurin removed the towel from my face, handed me a clean gown and walked into the main hospital room, I eased up carefully and walked back to the bed, easing myself into it, noticing her watching from behind.

“Nice ass,” she said, smiling, before turning and walking out of the room, closing the door behind her. Little did I know, it would be the last time I saw her inside the confines of the hospital.

While I waited on lunch, breakfast had been missed, I walked in circles at the foot of the bed, then sat in the guest chair and repeated the same leg exercises as yesterday, the television on local news, not really catching my attention, but taking my mind off of the pain in my hips and thighs. A serial killer was loose in Knoxville, dismembering women, and men alike, leaving various parts of their bodies in the same places, a sliver of an unknown woman's labia left tacked to the front door of the Old Courthouse Downtown, a man's penis and testicles in the fountain outside BB&T's main office across the street, a homeless man's arm on a park bench looking out across the river, a woman's desecrated torso floating in the fountain below the Sunsphere, tied with a fishing line so it drifted in the current from the jets, but basically stayed in one place, a three legged dog that saved a family from a fire in East Knoxville, a local Priest on trial for sexually abusing altar boys, a UT football player accused of rape, another player accused of jaywalking, a sidewalk being dedicated to Donald Trump, a group of kids protesting it, a group of counter-protesters that didn't even vote for Trump, the Knoxville Knights attempting to bring in magicians to draw a larger crowd, an outbreak of crabs on campus, students attempting to butt chug adderall in an attempt to study longer with less sleep, and the weather, warm, with a chance of rain and fog.

When I finished exercising my legs, I called the nurses desk asking what would be required to check myself out, I was informed that I would be required to sign about twenty papers, have a ride to drive me home and provide a billing address, seemed simple enough. I laid back in my bed and watched television, puffing on my little Blu cigarette, wondering who would visit me today, my friends or Ed.

I flipped through the stations and settled for another of Amelia's infomercials, this one actually having footage of the children her foods fed, I had an urge to use the hospital phone to call her listed number, just to see if she remembered me, instead I tucked the Blu under my pillow and lifted the back of the bed to a sitting position and waited on lunch while watching little children on the television with swollen bellies and skin pulled tight over their ribs wondered if there would be a lunch or a dinner.

Lunch consisted of a bottle of Powerade, white and cold, the flavor was disgusting but the vitamins and carbohydrates felt good flowing through my system, a little styrofoam cup of ice water, which sat to the side while I ate a small simple salad of lettuce and carrot shavings, dried almond bits and a vinaigrette, a pair of baked chicken breasts with a mesquite sauce baked across their skin, looking like dried catsup, boiled green beans from a can, the taste of fresh ones is stronger, different and a small plastic fruit cup, the juice inside it tasting better than the squares of squishy fruit.

After the tray was removed, I laid my bed back down and attempted to take a nap, my stomach full, my eyes, heavy and moist with exhaustion, but sleep would not come, images of the children stuck with me, playing in muddy puddles, sipping water from a stagnant pool ten feet from what looked like dirt holes dug to shit and piss in, lice in their heads and flies in their eyebrows, half naked mothers with bloodshot eyes, skin clinging to their bones, bodies ravaged with the same AIDS virus that their children carried, damned town priests telling the men to rape a virgin would cure them of the illnesses, the images would not fade, sleep would not come to me until late in the night, after dinner.

Chapter 7

When dinner was served and eaten, I requested another two Tylenol PM and took them with the little glass of water from the dinner tray. After the tray was taken away, I turned the television off and proceeded to walk easily, not missing a step or beat, to the bathroom, turning on the shower. I stood, instead of sitting, under the hot beads of water stinging my flesh, enjoying the warmth in the cool room, my desire to be out of the white pristine room, for once and for all.

I used the hospital soap to lather up my body one last time, scrubbing myself and rinsing myself twice, paying close attention to my cock, balls and asshole, feeling like they were extra dirty given my living arrangements for the past few weeks. I patted myself off with a towel before the chill kicked in, praying that I wouldn't return home only to find myself sick with pneumonia or a flu. I grabbed another gown from the shelf cut into the wall and tied the knot behind my neck before returning to bed, the Tylenol taking effect in my system already, a soft bubbly feeling seeping inside my body and mind, like I was filled with cotton.

I eased back into the bed, feeling as if I would make a mistake and tumble down onto the cold tile floor. I puffed on the Blu cigarette a few times, the cool menthol tickling my throat, before tucking it away inside my pillow, I closed my eyes, smiling, knowing this was my last night in the white room, in this pristine white building, with all of the people in white suits, I would be home tomorrow, in my own bed, tomorrow night. I faded off to sleep with the image of my own bed in my mind.

*

The dream was different than last time, warmer, daylight, the city, three months had passed since Amelia had met me for dinner, drinks and desert in the stairwell of what would eventually become my humble abode. I was still taking bit parts on shitty reenactment television shows, but this time around was different, I was in the lead, I was playing the killer, getting paid twenty-five dollars an hour to swing a rubber hammer at the back of some poor schmucks head.

In between takes, I was checking my phone, looking at messages, standing on the lawn of the house the crew was using as a location, smoking cigarettes and shooting the shit with the lighting team, the sound guys, to be honest, the actual production company

was pretty shitty, noses in the air, dreaming they were bigger than they were in actuality, put a turd in a suit and it's still a turd.

Between two of the takes, they were scattering fake blood around the man's body, so I could walk through it, slow, methodically, menacingly, even though they were only filming me from the knee down, I checked my messages and had one from Amelia, apologizing for her behavior, wanting to see me, to make it all up. I told her where I was, not sure when I would be free, but would be happy to meet her as soon as I finished. Amelia responded almost immediately, telling me she would meet me anytime that evening. I returned to the set, rejuvenated, refreshed, ready to maim, to kill, to commit a fictional act of murder.

In total, we filmed for thirteen hours, months later when the episode would debut on television, my role was reduced to about fifteen seconds, but at least I got paid twenty-five dollars an hour, like I said, schmucks. When the cameras stopped, I called a cab and headed for Scruffy City in Market Square, a group of my friends played in a live jazz and funk band, a set of theirs about to begin. I inboxed Amelia with my location and ordered a Corona with lime, lit a Marlboro and sat, waiting.

When Amelia entered the bar, she was a changed woman, a glow about her, her normally nice clothes were fancier, flashier somehow. I waved her over, but she motioned for me to follow her outside, I grabbed my Corona leaving a dollar on the bar and pushed my way through the crowd in the warm bar, out into the cool early evening.

"How have you been," I asked, sipping from my beer and trying to make eye contact.

"I've been good," she replied, smiling, but avoiding my eyes, glimpsing left and right and straight through me, everywhere but my face. "A lot of the contacts I made through you panned out, Sean."

"That's swell, Amelia," I said, finishing my beer and motioning for the outside tender to bring me another, "that's real swell. So why didn't you ever call me or message me or anything?"

"I've been busy," she said, digging into her purse, a nice Louis Vuitton number that looked brand new. She found what she was looking for and pulled it out, handing it to me.

"What's this?" I asked, feeling the weight and bulk of the envelope, confused. I didn't really feel comfortable opening it in the crowd so I tucked as much of it's bulk into the front pocket of my jeans, pulling my black tee shirt over it.

"It's ten thousand dollars, Sean."

I choked, gagged and almost spit over my shoulder before I realized where I was standing, I swallowed the spit down and lit another cigarette. I looked down at her, she finally made eye contact, a dead serious look on her face.

"I'm serious, in the last three months, I made nearly two hundred thousand dollars off of the people you introduced me to, and I felt like I owed you something," she said, looking away.

I attempted to pull the envelope back out of my pocket and give it back to her, but she wouldn't accept it, then the bartender came back and she handed him a twenty, shooing him away.

"Don't try to give it back, because I'm not going to take it," she said, "and don't contact me again, please. What happened that night, it can't happen again. Me and Mayne are trying to work it out, this time it might work."

"Oh, bullshit," I replied, looking her dead in the face, our eyes locking, "you don't think there's a possibility he just happened to hear about how much money you're making and he wants to share the wealth?"

"Maybe, Sean, maybe, but I love him and I want to try. Can you not respect that?"

"Are you kidding, I was just paid off, I barely respect my goddamn self right now," I said, my throat tight, I wanted to curse her out, to pull her close, to try and talk some sense into, instead, I just let her cry those fake tears as she turned and walked away from something pure, back towards a lie, plain and simple, a fucking lie.

"I can't believe this shit," I said to myself and no one else, sitting down at one of the wrought iron tables and drinking my beer, alone,

then I had another, and two more after that. I lost count after seven and I switched over to Long Island Iced Teas.

The band played long and hard, an after party happened at a hotel close-by, the penthouse, joints were passed around, a couple of those I helped to smoke, mirrors were passed around, cocaine on some, adderall on others, those I just let pass me by, women wound up naked by their own accord, I went into the bathroom and proceeded to barf up most of the alcohol in my stomach, the stuff that hadn't been digested yet, when I came back, some of the women were laying on the bed, some on the couches, slouched over my friends, the television was showing an episode of Twin Peaks, maybe it was the movie, Fire Walk With Me, fingers were in pussies, cocks were in mouths, lips were meeting, I just stood and watched it all, smoking on another joint that had found it's way into my hand, I watched as two women on the bed became three women and two men, dicks were stuffed into pussies and assholes were spread wide, toys were passed around, bottles became objects of passion when all of the toys were being used, two girls were on the floor, licking and fingering each other, looking up at me, motioning for me to join them, I just shook my head and watched, lighting a cigarette off of the joint roach and tossing it aside, a girl was on the couch on all fours, swallowing my buddy, down to the root, while another guy, was behind her, pushing his way deep inside her anus, a blue vein pulsing on her forehead, the three of them came together, I believe, because when she screamed, the one in her ass, he stiffened, and the one in her mouth, he pulled free and made a mess of her face and hair.

It was enough for me to see, not even aroused by the scene, just watching it happen before me, wondering why I was even there, I stubbed out my cigarette on the wallpaper and walked away, ignoring the sounds of pleasure and pain behind me, I left the penthouse and took the elevator down and out of the hotel, the first glimmer of a rising sun greeting me outside, walking was a blur, but I remembered waking up outside that green door a few hours later, smelling like a homeless person, alcohol seeping from my pores. I checked the phone number on the FOR RENT sign and asked if they allowed cash down payments, the place had been for rent so long, they jumped at

the idea, an hour later, I was inside the apartment, laying on the floor, planning on moving my meager belongings from the Weekly Rate Apartment across town later in the day, on the same floor, I fell asleep. Two days later, I took on my first official client as a gigolo and never thought twice about it.

Chapter 10

I woke up in a tangle of sheets, sweat soaking through making the thick plastic wrap of the mattress squeak and howl at even the smallest of movements, I reached for the phone and called the nurses desk, requesting the paperwork required to be released then proceeded to eat the cold breakfast on the tray in front of me. Supposedly scrambled eggs, probably from a jug that looked like orange juice, a rock hard biscuit with dried butter making the center soggy, two slivers of dried up slightly crispy bacon, a small mandarin orange, a small plastic apple juice cup and a cup of black coffee, tasting more instant than actually brewed. About the time I pushed the tray away, the papers were brought in and I signed them while waiting for the final visit from the doctor on call.

I flipped through the television channels, nothing really catching my attention, news, cartoons, world news, a soap opera in Spanish, two of those in English, a claymation show from the 80s, another news program, two sports channels, one covering local football, the other showing clips of horse races, an exercise channel, a home shopping network doing a segment on massages, another home shopping network, this one covering jewelry, a religious network featuring a block of television about the coming of the Anti-Christ.

I clicked the television off and proceeded to dig through the drawers in the room, finding my clothes from the night of my arrival, in shreds, but clean, I pulled them on and noticed how loose they were,

before deciding I would make a stop in the gift shop before leaving the hospital. I counted the tiles on the floor, the tiles in the ceiling, the clouds passing by the window and the shapes that they made. Finally just before lunch time, a doctor I had not met came into the room, gave me a once over, smiled and signed my release forms, I thanked him and pulled on socks and shoes, the shoes had not been cleaned, obviously, with little specks of dried blood on them, looking like drops of chocolate.

I pocketed my papers and made for the elevator, as I tapped my foot something dawned on me, my cellphone was nowhere to be found, I felt in my pockets, checked the nurses station and was informed when I came in, no phone was on my person. I sighed and began walking back towards the elevator, it was probably in evidence lockers at the Knoxville Police Department or sitting in a safe somewhere in New York.

Both options made complete sense, it just bothered me that in all of the time I spent here I hadn't realized my phone was missing. The doors opened, greeting me with nothing, an empty elevator. I pushed the button for the lobby level and leaned back against the wall, enjoying the nausea feeling of being brought down to the ground, brought back into reality.

I exited the elevator to a crowded lobby, a gift shop, a coffee bar and a small alcove with payphones and a small bench, the window behind it, showing a view of the campus three blocks away. I checked my pockets and found a wad of bills and a couple of quarters in the front right one with a crumpled pack of cigarettes, I used the quarters to call the cab company, none of my friends numbers memorized, a cab would be expected in the next half hour, they promised me.

I ventured into the gift shop and bought a t-shirt with the Sunsphere in the shape of a heart that read, "I Heart Knoxville" and changed shirts in that same little alcove with the payphones, before using a hundred dollar bill to buy a single cup of coffee, Aurin had returned my change and hadn't taken anything extra, the thought of her placing it all back how it had been, made me smile, knowing there was still some good in the world.

I walked outside, through automatic doors, into the sun for the first time in almost a month, the invisible rays of light almost blinding me, digging around in my pockets I managed to pull out the crumpled pack of Marlboro's and a lighter, putting one between my lips and lighting it, the gray smoke hitting my throat like a fist, filling my lungs with a harsh satisfaction. I stood there, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the natural air, with all of it's pollutants, smoking my cigarette and listening to all of the sounds I had missed, car horns, jackhammers, brakes screeching, people yelling at each other passing by on the sidewalk, the joy from the noises caught me off guard,

I noticed how pale my skin was while taking a puff from the cigarette, leaving the cigarette between my lips, I held my hand up in front of me, turning it, this way and that, amazed that my skin was without color, lavender paint had more color than my skin. The cab pulled up in front of me, the side door of the van opening automatically. I edged inside and gave the driver a once over, he looked almost familiar, the curve of his smile, the glint in his eyes.

"My address is..."

"I know where you're headed, Sean," the fat man in the front seat said, looking back, grinning devilishly.

"How'd you know?"

"You're address," the driver said, still grinning insanely at me.

"That's simple, Sean, we've met before."

"I thought you looked familiar," I said, giving him another, longer once over.

"No, we just spoke yesterday."

"I'm pretty sure we didn't," I said, looking away.

"Sure we did, we even walked on a beach, man."

I lost my breath, looking back at the driver, and I saw it then, a reflection in the rear view mirror, Ed was there, sitting in the drivers seat, and when my eyes reached the actual driver, it was another man, an obese guy with bad teeth and a nice shirt.

"Ed?"

"Yeah, buddy, just relax, I'm gonna drive you on home so you can get some rest, alright? We can have the conversation tomorrow, over

a cup of coffee, you won't even have to leave the apartment, my friend."

I was in disbelief, my mind in a million places, my heart racing.

"I think you need a cigarette, Sean," Ed said, lighting two and passing one back to me, "I'm sure that's not allowed in this cab, but I don't think the driver is worried about it right now, buddy."

Ed drove in silence, cracking my rear window so little veins of smoke would pass through instead of building a cloud around the ceiling. When we arrived at the apartment, I started to reach into my pocket, when Ed reached back and patted me with the cabbie's hand.

"This one is on me, man," he said, smiling, "but the next one, you owe the tab."

I said nothing, my mind running. I climbed out of the cab, the door shutting automatically behind me, Ed the cabbie pulled off in a hurry and I stood there, looking at the green door, tempted to turn and walk away, to never set foot inside again, to pick up a bottle of liquor and forget it all, but that wasn't the man I was, it wasn't the man I had ever been.

I reached in my pocket for the key and remembered that Bristol had the spare across the street, so I turned and walked across, ignoring traffic and the crosswalk, the lights to the gift shop weren't on, the blinds not open. So I took up some real estate on the brick wall next to the entry door and lit a cigarette, watched people walk by, in and out of Java, looking at me like I was one of the homeless folks that frequented the area. I walked into Old City Java with a smile on my face, digging into my pocket, I ordered a large house blend to go, paid with a twenty, took my change and the steaming cup and walked back outside, ignoring the looks and jeers from customers.

I sipped the hot liquid, enjoying the heat in my throat, the burn in my stomach, the roast leaving an almost bitter taste on my tongue, I lit another cigarette and took my spot on the wall, waiting on Bristol to show his face, I was eager to get inside my apartment, to take an hour long shower and just stand in the heat and steam, using my body wash, to watch the bubbles spin slowly before popping or vanishing down into the drain at my feet. Luckily, Bristol came walking around the corner a few moments later, I stubbed out my cigarette and took a

last chug of the coffee before tossing it into a green trash bin on the sidewalk.

“So, you really came home, huh?”

“Not yet,” I said, “no key.”

“Oh, yeah,” Bristol said, laughing, as he unlocked the front door to the gift shop. “Let me set all this shit down and I’ll get it out.”

I followed him into the steamy shop and took a look around while he got settled.

“I used a few bucks to get you a new phone, too, bro,” he said, sitting his bag on the glass counter.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Oh, it wasn’t a big deal, I paid them with your money,” Bristol replied, handing me the key to my apartment.

“I gave them your old number, so you have it again, and whatever numbers that were saved in your phone are on there too. Apparently, you had that backup protection. So it’s handled.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand, instead he pulled me into a hug and patted my back roughly.

“Just be careful, Sean.” I thought I felt his tears falling on my shoulder but I couldn’t be sure. “The phone is plugged in by the stove, I didn’t know you left it so dirty up there man.”

“It was clean when I left,” I said, pondering his comment. “Was the money where I said it would be?”

“Yeah, I even counted it before I paid up your bills,” he said, sitting behind the shop computer and powering it on.

“Thanks for everything, I really need to take a shower.”

“No problem, dude” he said, not looking up from the computer, clicking the mouse and getting to his daily routine at the shop. I left the shop and crossed the street, unlocking the door and walking up the splintered wooden steps.

The apartment was trashed, nothing was really broken, but clothes were strewn everywhere, CDs and records were scattered around the floor like loose change, my flat-screen TV was laying sideways, against a wall, turned over, but not broken, the mattress was without sheets, hanging partway off of the box springs, the futon had been pulled out of the zipped wrapper, tossed to the side, my

kitchen cabinets were open, cups tipped over, silverware scattered, but no broken plates, someone had ransacked the place, but had been careful to not break anything, searching for something, probably the money stashed away in my hiding spot.

The phone Bristol had purchased was plugged in beside the stove like he had said, I powered it on, checking the contacts, the touchscreen responding to my fingertips amazingly well, a newer design than I had previously owned, LG brand, with rose gold trim and a black back cover. I signed into my email account and started the long, boring process of syncing all of my accounts, sat the phone down and proceeded to begin cleaning. The whole thing took about two hours, hanging up clothes, putting others in a bag to send to the dry cleaners, tucking each pair of shoes into their cubby hole, washing and cleaning all of my dishes and eating utensils, I checked inside the fridge, which amazingly had been cleaned out, either Bristol or Essence was to thank for that, freshly stocked with a case of Perrier water, a gallon of orange juice, a head of lettuce, a jar of artichoke hearts, a tub of butter and a dozen eggs, the freezer was stocked with steaks, scallops, tilapia cuts and a decent sized tub of ice cream, vanilla and caramel blended.

I lit a cigarette and picked through my albums, finding a copy of the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, which I sat on the turntable and slid the needle to it's outer edge, soft static, then perfect melodies filled the air. I opened the window and leaned out, smoking and thinking, thinking and smoking, watching the sidewalk traffic increase as the afternoon crowd began to arrive in the area. I went into the bathroom and turned the water on, cranking the heat as high as it would go, enjoying the steam building around me as I undressed, afterwards I would have to cook, the desire too strong to ignore, I had been eating the shitty goop that passes for food at the hospital for too long, the Beatles made a glorious harmony in the living room while I stood in the shower, hot water cleansing me, soap making me feel fresh.

I took my time, bobbing my head to the sounds of the greatest band of all time, their harmony and instrumentation making everything that much more peaceful. When Side A of the record ended, I cut off the hot water and wrapped my lower half in a towel, through the

steam, I shaved my face, close to the flesh and smooth, the ticking of the end of the record echoing through the apartment, relaxing, calming, I went into the kitchen, laying out chicken breasts to thaw, I laid down on the bed, black silk sheets caressing my skin, holding me close as I nodded off to sleep.

When I awoke, the sun had begun to set, putting half of my floor in shadow, the other half in red light. I slid out of the sheets and pulled on a pair of jeans, American Eagle, stone washed, tight in the thighs and loose down the leg, tears on both knees, the left back pocket hung from three corners, the raw material rubbing against my flesh instead of a cotton gown, felt amazing.

I took the record off of the turntable, returning it to its sleeve, switching the player over to cassette and dug through my tapes, searching for something, not sure what, picking through one by one, until my hand stopped, on the original *Risky Business* soundtrack, I put it in the tape deck and hit play, listening to the sounds of Tangerine Dream.

I glided across the floor like Tom Cruise, mid-slide remembering I didn't have any socks on, tumbling to the floor, catching myself on the kitchen counter, seconds before I made facial contact with the floor. Without missing a beat, I opened the cabinet above the stove and pulled out a wok, setting it on a stove eye, I cranked the heat up, pouring oil in and cracking open the package of chicken, I stripped the pieces apart, tossing them in, I seasoned the meat with lemon pepper, a bit of ginger.

I washed my hands and stirred the wok, mixing in bits of spinach and little dabs of green beans, their snaps matching the hi-hats of the music coming through the speakers. I set a pot on another eye, putting water to boil, stirring the chicken while dropping noodles into the water, I boiled them until they softened, cutting the chicken mixture down to low, I strained the noodles and replaced them in the pot, slowly bringing the heat back up, with cold shredded cheese mixed and melted, I strained the chicken and poured it back in the wok, mixing the noodles in, stirring it all evenly.

I flipped the tape to Side B and pressed play, lighting a cigarette and checking my phone, no missed calls, but all of my contacts had

returned, 300 emails, mostly spam, sat waiting to be clicked and deleted. I tossed the phone back on the counter and leaned out the window, taking in the view of the street below once again, the street lights lighting up, the homeless vacating to the mission around the corner, foot traffic picking up, vehicle traffic lessening. I smoked my cigarette and watched the street come alive, so wrapped up in it all, I almost didn't hear my phone ring.

"Sean, my boy."

"Um, Ed?"

"Yes, sir, I'm glad you guessed my name."

"What's going on, Ed?"

"Have you thought about my offer?"

"I'm still thinking about it."

"How about coffee tomorrow? We can have a nice chat at Old City Java, you can sit in that window you were just leaning out and I'll work my little magic and you can see for yourself how it all happens."

"I, I guess," I said, pretty certain I wasn't going to take him up on his offer, something about the man didn't sit right with me, and his popping up as a cab driver earlier in the day didn't help much either. I lit another cigarette as I listened to him breathing through the phone, I felt like he was inside my mind, reading my thoughts.

"Oh, my boy, I am certain you will decide to take me up on my offer," he said, breathing deeper. "Just think of Cynthia, how he left her, how he left you, I am sure you will decide our plan of action, is the only way, to assure justice in it's most pure form."

I hung up the phone and went into the kitchen, taking the cooled chicken and pasta from the stove and spooning a decent sized amount onto a plate. The cassette tape ended, but I didn't mind, I ate in silence, enjoying the pleasures brought to my taste buds from the meal I had prepared. I wrapped the wok in cyran wrap and placed it in the fridge before rinsing off my plate and setting it in the sink.

I dug around in the bathroom cabinet, finding a bottle of Tylenol PM, swallowing two with a handful of water, before closing the window and laying back down in the bed. I smoked a cigarette staring at the ceiling, the fan spinning slowly, flicking the ashes over the edge of the bed, full of emotion, tears in my eyes, considering Ed's proposition,

seeing Cynthia in my mind, laid out in that parking lot, bleeding, suffering, gasping, dead.

I walked to the bathroom, tossing the cigarette in the toilet, peeing, it's color a soft yellow, pale in comparison that the filthy fluid that was coming out of me in the hospital. I laid back down, beginning to sob, my mind on Cynthia, my heart beating so hard I thought it would pound out of my chest, I lay that way a long time before falling asleep.

*

Sleep took me away from my resting form, lifting me through the ceiling, I stood on the roof, looking down at the street below, wearing only a pair of American Eagle jeans, I stood there in a misty rain, fog hanging about me like a shroud, I felt powerful, almost Godly, reality was my enemy, the dreams my friend, I could hear voices like they were hanging in the air, waiting to be grasped, for me to reach up and pull them down from the heavens and reply to them each, individually.

I looked up to the sky and shot straight into the heavens with a loud crack, I closed my eyes and went horizontal, floating slowly back down towards the earth, my body on a predetermined course, I was going along for the ride, no need to look, no sense in worrying myself, my body would never harm me intentionally, or would it? Seconds passed, peaceful serenity became a quiet decent. The air was warmer here, the sky was brighter, I opened my eyes to reveal a large golden ball, a man standing atop it, an instant later, I was standing beside him, looking out at the city. We were atop the Sunsphere, the man standing with me, was Ed.

"How's your night going so far, my friend?"

"If you'd let me sleep, Ed, it would be going much better."

"Ah, honesty, you're growing some balls again?"

"I've always had balls, Ed, I just didn't feel the need to show them to another man on a daily basis."

"Well, Sean, what do you think of the view?"

I looked around, taking it all in, the rising sun on the horizon, the small bursts of people, exiting buildings, walking in this direction and that, like ants, looks of joy on some faces, confusion on others.

"I've been here before, Ed."

"Oh, really, and how did you get on the roof of the Sunsphere, dear fellow?"

"Not, the roof, the observation deck, you know what I meant. Ed, why are we here?"

"I just wanted to show you what was yours, or wait, what could be yours, Sean."

"I'm not sure I understand, maybe it's because I'm asleep and this makes no damn sense."

"Oh, no, it is quite simple, if you shake my hand, if you do the deed, all of this, I will give unto you."

"Excuse me? Are you coming onto me, Ed?"

"No, Sean," Ed says, clearly angered by my responses, I wonder if, in this sleeping state, he still has access to my mind. This is all buried in my subconscious anyway, I wondered if he had a grasp on my mind here, as well as in my waking form. And what he said to me, about the contract and shaking his hand, where had I heard that before? I knew I had heard it, but couldn't quite place the quotes origin. I wanted to leave then, to go back to my merry land of dreaming, but I had a feeling a conversation with Ed was about the only sleep I would be getting that night. Somewhere in the pit of my subconscious, I knew something was wrong here, but I didn't care. I wanted what he had to offer, I wanted my revenge, I wanted to see a brutal justice dealt to the son of a bitch.

"When we meet tomorrow at the coffee shop, we can iron out the specifics," I said, turning, nearing the edge of the Sunsphere, the direction of the University of Tennessee campus.

"So you'll do it?"

"Yes, but I have specific requirements, Ed, or I'm null and void to the entire thing."

“Oh, my boy, what pleasures I will show you, what creatures you will be amazed by.”

I nodded his way and leaped from the Sunsphere, expecting to again take flight, instead I fell, my arms flailing, my legs kicking, I fell for what felt like an eternity, the cool, blue water of the man made river, rushing up to greet me, I closed my eyes, expecting impact, instead the moment I felt the cool water hit my skin like a street lined with concrete, I woke up.

Chapter 11

The sun had not yet risen outside, a murky gloom hung across everything like a fog of foreshadowing. I sipped from a cup of fresh-brewed coffee and lit a Marlboro 72, watching the Old City slowly coming to life. A light flickered on in one window, a homeless man shuffled by, probably on his way to a favorite bumming spot, further into downtown, his clothes, wrinkled and dirty, his left shoe missing a sole and wrapped in rubber bands, the right sole begging to be free, flapping against the pavement with every step like a rubbery hi-hat, making his dull life into an epic musical, just missing it's award winning tune. The sun rose slowly across the rooftops, embracing the cool brick with a grand warmth, the shadows from the light poles grew longer, touching the road and adding a glimmer of hope. I heard laughter from afar, a train rolled by on the tracks up the way, slowly clinking and chugging along to destinations unknown.

My mind kept wondering back to what Ed had said in the dream, if it truly was a dream, and not another of his fancy tricks. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if the magic he worked, had affected me last night. In a few hours, I would know what was required from me and what was going to be given in return, but what did I have to offer a man with these abilities of his? What could he gain from a normal

person like myself? I finished off my cup of the Colombian brew and poured another, taking down most of the hot liquid in a few sips. My throat was raw from the heat but my stomach thanked me. I slid on a pair of loose black sweatpants and a gray wife-beater, a pair of soft gray cotton socks and a pair of black tennis shoes before locking up and walking down the wooden stairs, each one creaking beneath my feet.

The heat outside hit me before I opened the door, the smell of beer still lingering in the sidewalk, the aroma of coffee, strong and fresh, floating across the street from Java, I took it all in, thankful to be out of that hospital, glad to be walking on my own two feet again. After locking the door, I walked, slowly at first, towards downtown, I let my feet find a steady rhythm and gained pace as I jogged up Summit Hill towards Crown Plaza, out of breath by the time I reached the crosswalk in front of that gaudy piece of modern art. I looked up at the building, wondering what had gone on that night, weeks ago, between Cynthia and her old man, as I had strolled in the opposite direction.

The light changed and I was off like a starter pistol had been fired, first down Gay Street, traffic was thin this early in the morning, so I zipped across the street, throwing caution into the wind, my lungs burning, my mind dizzy, I entered Market Square from the south, none of it's shops yet open, doing laps around the area, two and then three, before collapsing in a heap upon one of the benches there. I laid back on the bench, catching my breath and looking up at the sky, watching as the clouds passed by, the morning air clean and virgin like. I sat up with a start to an officer nudging me with his nightstick, an arcane tool I thought they typically left in the past.

"You can't sleep here, boy," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. He was short, overweight, gray hair, bloodshot eyes, a hint of liquor on his breath, bits of chewing tobacco stuck in his yellow teeth.

"I'm not sleeping," I replied, bringing myself up to a sitting position. "I went for a run and stopped for a breather."

"I know who you are, boy," he said, as if the word boy were an insult. "I know what you do, I know who you are."

"I think you have the wrong person," I said, trying to stand, only to be pushed back down into a sitting position. He leaned in close, his face inches from mine, the vodka on his breath stinging my eyes, the bits of tobacco still wedged in his teeth.

"No, Sean," he said, "I have the right fella."

I leaned back, the bench holding me in place, my neck aching from the awkward angle, trying to avoid his breath.

"Everybody knows who you are now, boy," he said, malice in his voice. "You and that poor girl, everybody knows who you are now. The city knows, the state knows. You made a fool of us all with your little profession. Take that business elsewhere, you hear me? We don't need the kind of drama you bring on this side of town. Leave it to the feller's over on the east side or maybe in Western Heights. We don't need that shit here."

"I never set out to see anybody hurt," I replied, the weight of his words, the implications behind them pulling my brain this way and that. "That wasn't me, that was her husband."

"Oh, so you fucks the married women, do ye? What about the men? You fucks them, too, boy? You some kind of metro-sexual, son?"

"First off, I'm not your son," I replied, standing, a few inches taller than him, which made me feel a little empowered, not much, but enough to win this charade of whose balls were bigger. "Secondly, officer, I couldn't find any men that would pay me, busy as your wife has been down here the last few years."

"Why you little sonofabitch!" he stuttered out, swinging at me with full force, I ducked the swing and spun around him, watching out of the corner of my eye as he wound up sitting on the bench, eyes burning holes in my back. I trotted off, slowly finding my pace again, my destination this time was already made up, it was time to go home.

My return trip was uneventful, slow and methodical, almost as if my feet were carrying me back without any input from my mind. I let my mind wander as I jogged back down the hill and into the Old City, none of my thoughts worth mentioning as I unlocked the door and took the stairs two at a time as it closed behind me. I left the shoes where they dropped, the same with my clothes, throwing open a

window and standing in a natural breeze. The cool sweat on my body cooled my temperature rapidly, I lit a Marlboro 72 and walked into the bathroom, turning on the water, hot, letting it steam up the room as I smoked my cigarette.

The water burned my flesh when I entered, spots of red appearing instantly as I stood below it's great stream of heat. I took the warmth in and suffered its punishment. Maybe it was pain that I deserved, maybe I should be burning in Hell right now and because of the doctors that saved me, I was still here on Earth, who fucking knew, I thought to myself as I scrubbed away the sweat with a body wash that was scented like a light mint.

*

The scent of mint took me back to a place, dark and threatening, in my mind, back into my childhood, with my mother and Richard. They were both sleeping down the hall, a few weeks had passed since the incident with the gun. To them, it was a distant memory, my mother saying it never occurred, just a dream in my child's mind, Richard always roaming close by, seeing if I would try to tell others about this incident.

Tonight that would all change, I told myself, a grim sneer on my face as I tiptoed through the trailer, every footstep feeling like a roar of thunder, but in reality, a silent muffled creak in the floor. I eased through the darkness, into their room, my eyes adjusting to the dim light, the sounds of their snores and grunts somewhere off to the left. I held my breath, focusing on the dresser, the top left drawer, summoning me. I itched to move forward in a hurry, my pulse quickening.

Instead I took my time, planning each step, avoiding the spots in the floor I knew would creak under my footfalls, I reached the dresser in a few quick steps, but the time felt slower, the moments longer than

humanly possible. I pulled the drawer open, shuffling through bags of marijuana and little nickel bags of cocaine, finding the object of my search, it's polished handle glinting in the street light passing through the corner window. I took the little revolver in my hand, feeling it's weight, accepting the consequences of the action I was about to take.

I slipped the cylinder open quietly, checking if it was loaded, shells filled all of the holes, so I snapped it back closed, the click echoing in my mind but nearly silent in the real world, Mama rolled over in the sheets, lost in a dream of her own, Richard farted and sniffed loudly, laying back into a slumber. I walked up his side of the bed, cocking back the hammer and pressing the barrel into the pillow beside his head.

I squeezed the trigger, thinking of my embarrassment, of the horror I had felt in the night since he had pulled it on me, my heart thudding in my chest, the report was quieted by the pillow but still loud enough to make me blink, my teeth clanked together, biting through my tongue, the kick catching me off off guard, swinging my arm away with a hard jerk. Both Richard and my mother woke up with a start, sitting upright and looking around confused, Richard was holding his left ear, blood running through his fingers, at first I thought I had actually hit him with the bullet, later on, my mother would tell me, his eardrum had ruptured.

I swung my arm back around and clicked the hammer again, pressing the hot barrel to his forehead, he yelped from the heat and my mother screamed out. I heard nothing, the adrenaline flowing through me, red filled my vision. I wanted to squeeze the trigger again, to paint the wall in the pink meat that hid inside his dark mind. Richard tried to reach, too drunk to control his motor functions. I smacked his forehead with the barrel of the revolver.

"Don't try that again, you piece of shit," I screamed at him, gobs of spit leaving my mouth and splattering his face. "I will do it, I'm not afraid of you anymore."

"Come on, son," he pleaded, "just give me the gun and we can forget all about this."

My mother sat beside him, wide eyed and crying. I ignored her and stared through his eyes, into his soul, beyond, into the wall behind him.

"I'm not your son," I responded, the urge to hit him again, boiling inside of me, threatening to show it's head at any moment. I fought the urge and looked him dead in the eyes. "You need to leave. You can leave now, or you can leave in the back of a meat truck, you sonofabitch. I don't really care which way you choose, but pick one, and pick fast."

"This is my trailer, boy, where the fuck am I supposed to go?"

"I don't really care, we'll be gone in the morning," I said, motioning towards my mother. My mother nodded, her eyes clearer than they were when she had went to bed, the drugs in her body clearly leaving it slowly. "We will be gone and you will leave us alone. I'm not asking you."

"What if I don't let you leave, you little shit?"

"There are enough fresh bruises on my mom that I could call it self-defense at any moment I choose, and you know it."

"Fine," he said, more afraid of being shot than being talked down to by a child. "Don't think this is the end of this, Sean!" Richard mumbled under his breath as he went about the process of getting dressed, the pistol focused on his back the entire time.

I followed him to the door, the pistol trained on his shoulders the entire time, nudging him when he would stop, testing my willpower to continue, blood had clotted in his ear, but dried drops painted a trail down the side of his head, specks of red, crusty and fresh, staining the white t-shirt he had pulled on. At the door, he looked back one last time, a scowl on his face, before leaving without another word. I slammed the door, locking it, a sigh escaping me, the adrenaline leaving my body, I leaned back against the door and slid down to the floor.

I returned to the bedroom, urging my mother to get up off of the bed and pack up her belongings, she cried quietly and stood as I went back into my room. I could hear her almost silent sobs as she packed her belongings into three raggedy little suitcases. I was surprised that Richard had left without further incident, pulling out of the gravel

driveway, tossing rock this way and that, some bits flying rapidly enough to plink and pling off the sides and windows of the trailer. I was strangely at ease, a cool calm settling over my body. The revolver was now on the dresser, the shells in my pocket.

I stuffed my few shirts and three pair of jeans into a trash bag, piling in my cassette tapes and Walkman tape player on top. I opened my bedroom window and lit a cigarette, a Marlboro Ultra Light 100, my mothers brand. I exhaled a cloud of smoke and realized a man standing before me out there in the darkness, his clothes black, a badge glinting in the moonlight.

"You still have that pistol, kid" he called out, one of his hands resting on the butt of a large caliber revolver in a polished holster on his hip.

"No, sir," I replied, showing my hands, the cigarette dangling from my lips. "What's this all about?"

"Your father called 911, saying there had been an altercation, he's at the hospital now, he's okay, other than a ruptured ear drum."

"He's not my father," I said, looking at him, returning the dead stare he was giving me.

"Another officer is about to kick in the front door there, unless you would rather unlock it."

I yelled over my shoulder at my mother, requesting that she open the door, while staying in the window frame, making sure I gave this man no reason to pull the gun on his hip. I heard my mother gasp as the other officer pushed past her, I flicked the cigarette out of the window and dropped to my knees, the officer outside eyeballing me. The second one entered the room behind me, roughly pulling my arms behind my back, cuffing me, reading me my rights.

I could hear my mother sobbing, louder now, begging for him to let me go. The cuffs on my wrists were too tight, rubbing against the bone, the teeth pinching my flesh. The cop led me towards the car, his partner joining the walk beside him. We stopped just short of the car as his partner, the one who had remained outside, opened my car door, purposely slamming my forehead into the roof of the car. I gasped out pain and shock as I was tossed into the back of the squad

car, blood running from my nose and dripping, then splattering onto my t-shirt, looking like splashed of red paint.

The two cops climbed into the front of the cruiser, talking among themselves.

“I can’t believe the little prick tried to make a run for it,” one of them said to the other, I looked out the back window, watching my mother, bathed in red and blue light, standing in the middle of the road, looking lost and empty, holding herself, shaking in the early hours of the morning.

My childhood was officially coming to an end, my adult life about to begin. What had started as a drunken argument between Richard and my mother, had ended with me being both the defender and the victim, a trait that would follow me for the rest of my life.

Chapter 12

The sound of my phone ringing brought me back out of the daze, I glimpsed at the screen before answering the phone and speaking.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello, my boy,” it was Ed, “you need to stop leaning out of that window before you fall.”

I looked at the sidewalk below me, the storefront of Java, seeing a blonde smiling and waving up at me.

“You like my borrowed look, Sean,” I heard through the phone as the blonde’s lips moved in sync with what was being said. “Are you ready to talk?”

“I need to get dressed,” I said.

“No need,” Ed replied, I watched the blonde raise a hand and snap her fingers before I realized what was happening. A soft pop and suddenly I felt weightless as the world went dark, infinity was before me, all time consumed me for just an instant, I saw a plain of

something that resembled hell, my flesh felt warm in the heat, realizing I was standing in the sunlight, I opened my eyes to a smiling face.

The blonde in front of me was giggling, her breasts bouncing, it took a few seconds to realize what had happened, I glimpsed up at the window and gasped, my body was still there, eyes moving, watching traffic and bobbing it's head to a tune only it could hear.

I looked down at the body I had invaded, brown khaki shorts, Bermuda leather sandals and a pale blue button up shirt. The hands were wrinkled and covered with liver spots. An old man, Ed had tucked my conscious into the body of some old fart, here on vacation from what the thoughts were telling me. Ed, on the other hand, looked like Pamela Anderson, younger and with more makeup, hiding the age of a prostitute I was used to seeing around the area. Martha was her name, I was almost certain, a legend of the mouth.

"Let's go get some coffee," lady Ed said, the feminine voice sounding nothing like the one he had used over the phone. "It's so hot out here, these breasts are sweating up a storm. Not as hot as hell, but damn sure feels like it."

Lady Ed ordered an espresso and I ordered a Mountain Valley Spring Water, a green glass bottle, sparkling and carbonated. I paid with the old man's card, the pin in my mind, instantly. We took a table in the back, away from the yuppies and green haired lesbians that filled the main room, a table by the window so I could keep an eye on myself.

"So, my friend, are you convinced yet?" Ed asked in the seductive voice of the body he held.

"Yeah," is about all I could manage, taking half of the water down in a single, long gulp. I saw Bristol walk by outside, my body responded to his wave and went back to watching the car and foot traffic passing it by. "How would it work?"

"I'll pass you into one of his co-workers," Ed replied, "early enough in the day for you to catch him at the office, to convince him into going out for a drink or maybe up to the roof to smoke a joint. How you do it, is entirely up to you."

"And in return?"

“Your soul,” lady Ed said, grinning devilishly. “But we can work out the fine print later.”

“Oh, yeah, my soul, okay,” I replied, laughing and sipping my water, the bubbles tickling my tongue.

“Let’s shake on it and get out of these bodies. This hooker, though, nice, feels dirty to me,” Ed said, caressing his own nipple until it popped out of the tight shirt.

I took Ed’s hand and shook it, a sudden weight on my chest, then a snap and a pop. I blinked and was looking out the window at traffic again.

I lit a cigarette and watched the old man and the blonde going about their conversation as if their lives hadn’t just been on pause for half of an hour. I poured my coffee down the drain and tossed my cigarette into the toilet bowl before boiling a saucer of water and tossing in a packet of ramen noodles. I ate them quietly, wondering when Ed’s call would come.

What would I be doing? Who would I be with? As if reading my thoughts, my phone rang, Essence’s name and image popped up on the screen, I had the urge to ignore it when I heard a knock at the door downstairs, I answered the phone and walked down the stairs at the same time.

“Hello,” I said, pulling the door open, Essence was standing there, a smile on her face, her dimples showing themselves defiantly. I smiled back, hanging up the phone, she pulled me into her arms, hugging me and kissing my cheek.

“I knew you’d probably ignore my call, so I just drove over,” she said before releasing me.

“Um, thanks,” I replied, giving her a quick peck on those thick juicy lips. I stood aside and let her lead the way up the stairwell into my apartment. Her round ass swishing left and right as she climbed the steps, wooden and noisy.

“Damn, Sean, you clean up nice.”

“Most of my clothes wound up in the dumpster,” I replied, closing the door behind me, “why are you here?”

"I just wanted to check on my friend," she replied, sitting on the edge of my bed, I lit a Marlboro and sat beside her. "Are you okay, Sean?"

"I'm good, just a lot on my mind," I said, hitting the cigarette and thinking about Ed's words.

"How about you let me cook for you for a change," Essence asked.

"You'll have to go pick up whatever you're planning on fixing," I said, walking into the kitchen, opening the empty fridge for her to admire. "I'm kinda low on stock."

"That's cool," she replied, standing and walking towards me. "I just miss my friend."

Essence wrapped her arms around me, her head on my neck, softly crying on my shoulder. I patted her back and whispered promises that I was a changed man, that she didn't have to worry about me going away anytime soon, asking myself if it were true, how my deal with Ed would change things, alter my world and those around me. I lifted her head and gave her a peck on the forehead. Essence smiled, wiping at her eyes and backing away.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, just leave the door unlocked for me."

After Essence left, I pulled out a copy of Joe Cocker's Greatest Hits and let it play from the beginning, low, a soft soundtrack to the thoughts in my mind. I laid back on the bed, staring at cracks in the ceiling, listening to a white man croon out his blues like a professional, at some point, I nodded off.

*

The cell they placed me in was seven feet by nine feet, gray paint on the walls and ceiling, all cinder block and concrete, my bed consisted of a concrete slab, a foot high and almost a foot wide, the mattress, lumpy and thin enough to feel the concrete below. I was given an old lumpy pillow with feathers poking at the seams, my sole piece of cover, a thread bare green square. Finally the door, two inch

thick gray steel with a scratched window that was two inches tall and five inches wide, a mesh wire between two thin plates of plastic.

The bare fluorescent bulbs overhead stayed on through the day and night, I wasn't sure if sleep deprivation was my personal punishment or just a regular function in the juvenile center, The room was my own personal hell for two long weeks, but the first night let me know I was safer at home, in Richard's hell than I was locked away in a cell.

I had almost fallen asleep, the first time in weeks, that I felt like my sleep wouldn't be interrupted by screams and shouts or drunken laughter. Alone in that room, under the bald bulbs, I was alone, I was at peace, until the door to the cell opened.

The two officers that entered the room weren't the arresting officers, these two men in uniform were something completely different. One was tall, slender, thinning blonde hair with pasty white skin and cold icy eyes, his name was Parker and had become an officer because his mother had insisted upon it, his father had died in a backroom poker game during the early 1980s. The bags under his eyes suggested an alcohol problem, the flared up nostrils, hinted at a cocaine addiction.

The other cop was Weston, short and stocky, a bald head, teeth stained yellow from years of coffee and cigarettes, blood shot hazel eyes, a crooked nose that had been broken, at least once, probably more. I knew him from home, bags of drugs and money exchanging hands with Richard on more than one occasion, the grin on his face terrifying me, making me shudder violently.

"This the one," Parker asked, his speech slightly slurred, an aroma of alcohol filling the air like an imaginary green cloud.

"Yeah, little bastard ruptured Richard's fucking ear drum, the little prick," Weston replied, shaking his head. I tried to remain still, my heart thudding in my chest, maybe they would think I was asleep and leave the cell, I was nervous, shaking under the wool square, a gray t-shirt and black sweatpants, sizes too big, doing nothing to hide the tremors inside of me.

"You sure Clark won't say anything?" that was Parker, talking again, Weston laughed, closer to me now, I could feel his breath, smell the bourbon and coffee mixture in it,

"That old sonofabitch? No, he's too scared," Weston replied, "besides, I gave him the rest of the night off. Remind me to punch him out when we leave."

"What are we gonna do to the kid," Parker said.

"Grab his wrists," Weston replied, the sound of polished wood against leather seeming like thunder in my ears. "I'll wake him up right and proper."

The first time the nightstick came down on my chest, I yelped out in pain, a fat hand clasped over my mouth, the stench of cigarettes deep in the flesh of it. Parker grabbed my wrists, yanking hard on my arms, the muscles in them screaming.

"Shhhh, don't wanna wake any of the neighbors, do ya?" Weston asked, hissing, inches from my face.

I swallowed the sobs in my throat, breathing through my nose, each breath causing a burn in my chest that wouldn't fade. A roll of duct tape came out next, a long strip ripped free and wrapped around my head, holding a dirty sock, crunchy and sour against my mouth.

"Hold him still, Parker, hold the prick still," Weston said, his face wet with excitement, his eyes glazed over in pleasure. I tried to look up at Parker, but the tears in my eyes made the light too harsh to see beyond. The second blow from the nightstick sent sharp pains through my stomach and chest, I screamed through the sock, more of it gaining access to my mouth, the third blow caused stars to pop in front of my eyes, the world began to darken, before the fourth my stomach went numb, the blows just felt like raw pressure on my flesh, bile came up my throat, some absorbed into the sock, the rest attempted to go back down, another blow brought it back up, squirting out of my nose, burning my nasal passage, the final blow went to my crotch, causing me to pass out.

It was the first night in Juvenile Detention, my first night in the system and all I had tried to do was protect my mother. She had done this, caused all of this and for years to come, I would blame her. For nearly a week, I would piss blood, sometimes when I sat on the toilet,

I would smell copper, like fresh pennies, my bowel movements caked in red and floating in a bowl of glowing red blood.

Chapter 13

When Essence returned, I was sitting up, a layer of cold sweat on my flesh, listening to Leonard Cohen and mumbling incoherently. More than once in our strange friendship, Essence had found me in this state, not often, but enough times for her to know that prying for answers would not help. She sat down the two bags of groceries on the stove and came to me, sitting beside me and bringing my head to her breast, she rocked gently, like a mother and patted my shoulders.

I let her rock me there, letting the past fade away like the mist of a dream, the more I thought about it, the more Ed's offer made sense, I understood my desire to hurt this man, to kill him, more in that single moment than ever before. To me, he was Richard re-incarnated, he was those two guards, Weston and Parker, who repeated their actions nightly, increasing the intensity and violence in their abuse every night, finding pleasure in my suffering, savoring the sensations they felt abusing me, just a child compared to them.

Eventually, I calmed and Essence rose, her shirt moist from my sweat, she removed it and hung it on the door knob, her round breasts wrapped in a silky white bra, she looked over her shoulder and grinned at me, making way into the kitchen, I lit a cigarette and watched as she pulled down various pots and pans. Milk went into one, water into another, I watched her work the culinary magic from afar, sweat forming on her brow, dripping from her chin, rolling slowly down the curve of her breasts.

I opened the windows, chatter from the foot traffic outside drowning out the heavy silence in the air. The sexual tension in the room was so thick a knife could slice through it. The smells coming from the stove caused my mouth to water and my stomach to grumble

with desire. I decided to let the curiosity tease me as she went from a pot to a skillet and back, sprinkling this and dicing at that.

I leaned against the window sill and watched the people going by below me, oblivious to my existence, except for one. She looked familiar with her golden brown skin and wide hips, she smiled at me, waving. I returned the wave and realized who she was, motioning for me to come outside.

"Essence, dear, it may be supper for three," I said, shuffling towards the door.

"No, just two," she said, smiling devilishly, "I ran into your nurse while I was out. Running into meaning I called her and invited her to dinner."

I stood there, mouth agape, as she pulled on her shirt and patted the crotch of my sweatpants, squeezing enough for me to harden, then letting go.

"I figured he was ready for some exercise," she cooed in my ear, before nibbling on it and leading me down the stairs.

Aurin was standing there, almost glowing, a sweaty, green round bottle with a red cap in one hand, a stack of DVDs in the other.

"Essence said you liked sake', so I stopped along the way," she said, smiling at me. "I'm not intruding, am I?"

"No, girl, Sean's in shock is all," Essence answered for me, "I'm going now but there are two steaks in the oven, his is the slightly bloody one. Plus, a few different sides to choose from."

Essence darted away before I could protest. Aurin stood before me in a black sundress, little splotches of random colors of paint decorating the material, around her left ankle a golden chain hung loosely.

"I hoped you would be moving around by now," Aurin said, smiling, her dimples showing in the fading afternoon sun.

"I'm doing alright," I said, "ran about four miles this morning."

I edged to the side and let her lead the way up the wooden stairs to the loft. As she walked, I admired her thighs, thick and curvy but toned. At the top of the stairs, she waited for me to open the door, brushing past me, our bodies touching.

"I brought Bogart, some other things," she said, laying the DVDs on the bed and striding into the kitchen, the bottle of sake, found a spot on the counter as she pulled the steaks from the oven.

"Sean, where are your plates and glasses, dear?" Aurin asked. I pulled down two clear glass plates from a cabinet, two tumbler glasses from another, while Aurin put the steaks on the plates, I dropped three ice cubes into each glass and poured two knuckles of sake' into each. Behind me, Aurin was putting scoops of steaming augroten potato slices and steamed brocolli on each plate, a spoonful of melted butter was poured over the brocolli.

I reached past her and slid open the drawer with the nice silverware inside.

"I was about to ask that," Aurin said, grabbing two forks and two slender knives from the drawer, bumping it closed with a round hip.

"I know," I replied, while slicing a lime and placing a sliver of it into each glass. I took a plate from her, handing her one of the glasses. Sitting on the end of the bed, I flipped through the stack of DVDs and selected The English Patient, strangely fitting for the situation, while I skipped through the menus, Aurin sat close to me and sipped on her sake' and lime.

"It's so smooth," she said, sitting her glass down and sitting her plate in her lap. The movie began, slow roving shots over a hot and dusty desert, the instrumental score, drawing us in.

"So, you didn't invite me," Aurin asked, between bites.

"Essence did it, I had no idea," I replied, placing a piece of steak between my lips, the meat almost melting in my mouth. "I thought she was staying for dinner."

"Would you have preferred that?"

"Not really," I answered, "she tends to fall asleep early and wake up before sunrise."

Aurin laughs at this and pats my leg squeezing it.

"I could see that somehow."

"Essence is one of my best friends, has been for as long as I can remember," I said, trying to focus on the plight on the television before me. "I've known her for years, she always pulls tricks like this."

“Oh, I thought you were the one that turned tricks,” Aurin said, again laughing.

I just shook my head and turned my attention back towards the television. I sipped at the drink and took another bite of my steak, a bit of broccoli was chewed up next, the flavor complimenting my drink.

The movie played and we made small talk, the ice cubes melt, the glasses are filled again. I tell her about my experience in Market Square, she tells me about her days at the hospital since I left, we empty our glasses again and again. Around the time the plane crashes down in the desert, we share our first kiss, both of our lips taste of citrus from the lime.

I smile shyly and carry the plates into the kitchen, running water of them and filling our glasses one more time, the bottle has run dry. We sip our drinks, watching as Ralph Fiennes tries helplessly to save the married woman he loves from a lonely death in a deep, dark cavern. Aurin sobs a little when he finally returns to find his love dead, edging closer to me, I put an arm around her shoulder and she places a hand on my thigh, warm is her touch even through the sweatpants.

Our lips meet again, this time, softer, slower, our lips part and our tongues dance, slowly finding a rhythm, our hands exploring each others neck lines, her left hand massaging my leg, grasping my thigh, easing into the seam of my sweatpants, taking me in her hand and caressing me, teasing me, I pulse in her hand, she gasps and holds me firm, I could feel her heartbeat through her hand.

I licked her lips and she bit my lower one, she squeezed the lime from her glass, sprinkling my neck in the sour nectar, licking it off, still she held me, rough at first, loosening her grip as the sweat in her hand and the clear fluid from my tip mixed. Aurin held the lime in her mouth, softly pushing me back onto the bed.

My sweatpants wound up around my ankles, the cool lime creating an icy layer around my shaft, I moaned and looked down as warmth surrounded my penis, I ran my fingers through her hair as her head bobbed up and down, hot swirls and cool breaths as her tongue circled the shaft. One of her hands inched up, caressing my chest.

I pulled my shirt off, her fingers running through the soft hairs there. While her mouth worked magic, her hands slid my shoes and

sweatpants off. The heat in her mouth intensifying as she caressed my thighs and took all of me into her mouth, causing me to gasp.

Aurin stood, the sundress falling to the floor, her body seeming to glow before me in the fading sunlight, her breasts round and full, nipples dark and hard. Her pussy peeking out at me from a small, curly bush, moisture was there, glistening in the rays of sunlight.

“Sean, scoot back, baby,” Aurin said, “this hardwood isn’t any good for the knees.”

I complied with her request, edging back. Aurin slid onto the bed, gripping me, ready to slide me inside her warmth, her juice dripping from the spot between her thighs, running down my shaft, pure heat in a cool breeze, Aurin was wet, soaking and ready, but I stopped her.

“Not yet,” I said, kissing her fingertips, feeling her wet lips, soft, massaging at the tip, beckoning me to spread them, to thrust upwards, just once to join our bodies. “I want to taste you first, Aurin.”

“Okay, baby, let me lay down,” Aurin said, moving away.

“No, sit on my face,” I replied, mouth wetter than the ocean at the thought of it. “Or spin around and keep doing what you were doing, but I need a taste.”

“I’m a big girl, Sean,” she replied, I put a finger to her lips, then kissed her deep, her mouth tasting like salt and citrus.

“I’m a professional,” I said, coaxing her to spin around so that her knees were at my shoulders and her pussy was inches from my face.

I spread her lips and labia, drops of juice, hanging there like morning dew, running down her inner lips and dripping on my face like a full honey comb pulled from a glistening hive. Aurin took me into her mouth again and I lifted my head to meet her in that sacred place.

I licked on her and she sucked on me, when my tongue got tired and my jaw got sore, I rested them, using one then two of my fingers, exploring her opening, playing a game of hide and seek in her pink opening, teasing at her anus, pushing in the tip of a finger and another in her pussy, feeling the intensity of her sucking increase.

I licked gently at her clit while my fingers slid in and out of her gooey pussy. I felt her clench my fingers, teeth barely grazing against my shaft before she pulled away from me, gasping.

"I, I can't take any more," she gasped, sweat on her face, her cheeks flushed and red hot. Aurin lay on her back, panting, looking at the ceiling.

I rolled on top of her, kissing her lips, hard. Our eyes met and I pushed up into her, all the way.

Aurin gasped and kissed me again, our hips, slowly grinding in circles, the same pace and direction. I held her hips and she clenched my back. Aurin lifted my face to meet hers.

"Make me feel beautiful," she said, tears in her eyes, I kissed each one away as it rolled down her cheeks.

"But you are beautiful," was my only reply.

I kissed her then, long and hard, smashing our lips together, tasting blood, but not caring, the strokes became slower, deeper, almost all the way out, then deep again, Aurin cried out and kissed my neck, biting me there.

"Don't, don't you stop, Sean," she cried into my shoulder, "oh, baby, you feel it, oh damn, show me that magic too. Make my pussy feel magical, baby. Get all this loving."

I slid out of her, a wet sucking sound left there in my wake, flipping her onto her belly, nibbling at one round ass cheek before easing back inside of her wet, drippy honeycomb. Air escaped and she gasped, bucking back into me. I laid across her back to slow her roll a little bit, licking her spine as I went, biting at her shoulders and kissing her neck, slowly stroking in and out of her quivering opening.

Aurin turned her head to the side and looked at me, kissing my lips, biting the lower one gently. I took a handful of her hair, pulling her head back further, I bit her earlobe, sucked on her neck and kissed her lips again, the pressure building inside of me.

I eased out of Aurin and rolled her back over to face me, our lips met as I stuffed my hardness back inside her, rougher this time, not caring, the walls, clenching at me. I put her knees on my shoulders and began to plow deep into her field, our pelvises locked together, heat and friction there, I could feel every inch of her body, every inch of mine was alive, calling out.

My final stroke, I pushed her back, our eyes locking, she nibbled her bottom lip, then gasped as I let go inside of her alter of sex, the

throes of my orgasm causing my legs to shake and the strength to leave my arms. I collapsed atop her, our bodies meeting and making a sensual sweaty slapping sound.

The movie had ended long ago, a fruitless plight to save a married woman in a cave, told by a man wrapped in bandages, slowly dying from wounds caused by him trying to save her. The screen behind us was dark, but the room was illuminated by the street lights outside, as I went limped inside of her I sensed all of these things and none of them.

"Damn," Aurin sighed before kissing me on the cheek and pushing me off of her. "I need to pee."

"I hope it doesn't burn," I say, jokingly, before lighting a cigarette. I stand in the darkness, staring out the window, watching the foot traffic in the Old City, when Aurin returns, she stands behind me, kissing my neck, her hands running through my chest hair.

"God, that felt so good," she says, turning me towards her, "you made my pussy feel so alive. My kitty was talking to me, Sean."

"Um," was all that I could manage. She giggled and kissed my lips, patting my sticky cock before turning away, moving towards the bed and slipping back into her sundress.

"I gotta get a move on," she said, clumsily opening the DVD player and sliding the DVD back into its case. "You gonna be alright?"

"Yeah," I said, not really wanting her to go.

"I'll call you," she said, blowing a kiss and walking out of my life. I lifted a hand to shout for her to stop, to come back, then lowered it again, letting her leave.

It had begun to rain, so I opened the windows, dug through the records in the corner and found a copy of Phil Collins' Greatest Hits, just letting the record spin. I leaned on the window sill and lit a fresh cigarette. The record played softly in the background as I watched the foot traffic below, wondering if Ed was among them, watching me, planning out his grand drama with me as the lead character, Cynthia crossed my mind, as did my mother, her many lessons in playing the victim. I went into the bathroom, urinating, tossing my cigarette into the bowl before flushing.

I grabbed a white wash cloth from the shelf, covered it in steamy water, I scrubbed my balls and penis, feeling dirty and used up. I laid across the tossed sheets, the cool air drying my wet crotch, making me shiver. I watched the ceiling fan spin and enjoyed the cool feeling of soft fluffiness I felt.

Sleep had me in it's grasp and I let it take a good hold, closing my eyes and letting out a single sigh.

*

The abuse continued nightly during my two week stay at the detention center, never my head, never my face, my arms and legs were decorated in purple marks, my stomach and chest and back, covered in lacerations, bruises and fading yellow splotches. Some of the scars would be permanent, the arch of my right foot, raw and aching any time I was on it for more than a few hours, my left shoulder and arm, down to the wrist, would go almost numb for weeks at a time.

When the time came for my hearing, my mother was there, numbed in a drugged out stupor, cocaine and pills, from the look on her face, Richard by her side, smiling like the Devil himself. They had thrown me in a long sleeve gray sweater, three sizes too big, itchy and stained, and the typical orange jumpsuit pants to cover the marks and bruises on my flesh. Only a few sentences are truly clear from the entire proceedings, my mind a blur, exhausted, my body broken.

"Is the mother in attendance?" the judge inquired, a fat man, with a balding head, greasy strands of brown hair, patted down across the shiny dome.

"Yes, your honor," I heard from behind me.

"Do you wish to take Sean home, ma'am," the judge responded. My heart raced, my shoulders lifted and I felt something I had not felt in weeks, hope. The seconds it took for her to respond, felt like a lifetime, each heartbeat a practice in patience.

“No,” was my mothers single word response, flat and unemotional, I lost my breath, I choked, my world stopped spinning. The woman who birthed me, who I had protected and went to jail for, had said “no”. And had said it as easily as responding to a waiter asking if she would like an up-size on her fries.

The judge gave me over to the state, sending me back to the detention center until suitable placement in a group home was found. My child service lawyer informed me that I would only spend one, maybe two, more nights in the center before I was placed.

The cuffs were put back on my wrists and I was escorted back to my cell, one last night of Hell to be endured. I tried to walk with my shoulders high and my chin up, but my flesh and muscles ached, my mind feeling gone, lost to any hope of salvation.

Parker and Weston came into the cell, later that evening, nearing midnight, drunker than usual, more toxic than normal. Sleep had come to me easier than expected, the clanking of the door, the lock flipping over, woke me up with a start.

The gray shirt was ripped from my body like a piece of paper, Parker flipped me onto my stomach as I tried to struggle, my hundred pound frame not standing a chance to break free of his grasp. The shirt was knotted around my wrists, another dirty sock was shoved violently into my mouth, the cotton scratching my throat, bile stuck there, I focused on forcing back the urge to gag.

Weston laughed, pulling off his belt, menace in his laughter.

“Last night to party with the kid,” Parker said, spit splashing onto my back.

“Let’s make it one he remembers,” replied Weston, slapping my back and legs with the heavy black leather police issue belt, the teeth nicking at my flesh with each swing, piercing it, drawing blood,

I screamed against the sock, drawing it deeper into my throat, my flesh seeming to go numb after so many swings. After two nights of abuse, the two cops had realized the night stick was too much, making me lose consciousness, my pain unable to satisfy their sick urges if I was knocked out.

“Grab his pants,” said Weston, excited, out of breath.

My mind went in a million directions, my struggle and resolve to break free strengthened, only to be held firmly in place once more.

"We gonna fuck him?" said Parker, yanking at my pants and underwear. I went rigid, fighting the inevitable. Finally, Parker got a hold and pulled both pants and briefs down around my ankles roughly.

"No, stupid," Weston replied, his hot breath on my flesh, liquor strong and fresh, it's scent filling my nostrils. "Too much evidence if he tries to talk. DNA and things like that, ya know?"

"He does have a nice ass, though," Parker said, pressure against my anus as he spoke. "Look at it."

"Yeah, all pink and tight, like a virgin pussy," Weston said, sweat dripping on my back as they examined me, picturing things I blocked out of my mind before I could think them.

Something hard and round pressed against my sphincter. I squeezed my legs and buttocks as tight as possible, praying. To a God that never answered, I felt the pressure stop and sighed in relief, looking to the side, Parker in the corner, rubbing his cock, panting, smiling at me, sweat on his face.

"Don't you look at me, faggot, or I'll give you an eye full."

Weston was laughing, dangling the nightstick in front of my face, he bent beside me, rubbing my cheek with his fat hand.

"Let's try this again, Sean," he said, our eyes locked. I could feel the terror in my eyes, shaking me to the core, he just smiled at this, evil to the core.

I clenched as long as I could, my child's body no match for the other man's strength. I felt the nightstick rip into my anus, tearing apart the flesh there, an exit turned into an entrance, my bladder spilling, the mattress and sheet suddenly hot beneath me, drops of fire running down my face in the form of tears. If there was a God listening, his only answer to my prayers was letting me pass out.

When I awoke, my pants were back around my waist, a new shirt folded neatly beside my pillow, a new sheet, wrapped around me. I stood painfully and walked, more like a slow limp, over to the sink in the corner, the scratched mirror above it, my destination.

I looked at my back in the mirror, dried blood was caked in places, little streams of blood, still flowing in others, I had no desire to

see the blood and bruising around my buttocks, the pain of just pulling my pants down to urinate, making the world blurry. My underwear were crunch and stuck to my body, dried blood like glue, eventually they gave way, allowing me to urinate, blood leaked out of me where yellow piss should have flowed.

I limped back over to the mattress, pulling on the t-shirt, my attempt at laying down gently successful, natural sleep, came soon after.

Chapter 14

I wake up to my phone ringing, close at hand, closer than I remember leaving it last night. Warren Zevon singing loudly, bringing me out of my slumber. I click the speaker button and roll over, glimpsing outside, darkness still in the sky, street lights illuminating my ceiling.

“Are you ready, Sean?” it was Ed, sounding as awake as always. I considered his question, thought of all of those times I couldn’t fight back, of all the suffering I had done at the hands of others and answered without a hint of hesitation.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I said, anger in my voice, a desire for revenge and retribution brewing inside of me.

“Take a few hours to get your affairs in order,” Ed said, “tell your friends you’re busy, the usual. When the time is right, things will begin to happen very fast.”

The call ended without even so much as a good-bye. I went into the kitchenette and started a pot of coffee, aiming for the bathroom, to urinate and bathe. I stood in the shower, hot and steamy, letting it burn my flesh, the pores opening before I scrubbed away the smells of sex and perspiration. I shaved my face and looked in the mirror, the man before me was about to become a murderer. Anxiety and fear were fighting for control of my emotions. But I kept both at bay, pouring a cup of coffee, lighting a cigarette and deciding whom I should call first and what kind of lie should I tell. The thought was interrupted with a knock at the door.

I took the steps two at a time, wondering, if it were Bristol or Essence, beckoning me to my door like something from a Beatles' song. I opened the door, a nice cloud of smoke exiting my mouth, greeting Essence like a surreal scene of a detective film. She waved her hand in front of her face and smiled.

"So, how were things?"

"Come upstairs, we need to talk," I said, my tone serious, my demeanor stiff, so many thoughts and emotions running through me, none of them a compliment to last night's pleasures.

"Was she that bad?" Essence said, stepping past me and climbing the stairs as I shut the door, the sky outside a hazy orange, the sun slowly beginning its climb over the horizon. "I'm sorry. I thought it would be better than that."

"This has nothing to do with Aurin, Essence," I replied, following her up the stairs into the apartment proper. "I've been given an opportunity, a chance, if you will."

"What are you talking about?" Essence said, pouring a cup of coffee and sitting on the edge of my bed. I scooped up my cup and sat beside her, not knowing how to answer her question correctly. Ed had told me to speak to no one about our deal, our agreement, and here I was about to pass the information on to one of my best friends. I wondered if Ed could hear us talking, if he were a bug in the room, listening. Of course not, that would just be silly.

"Remember the doctor?"

"Yeah, Dr. Alexi? He seemed to know his stuff."

“No, the one I talked to you and Bristol about, the one Aurin said didn’t work at the hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, the drug and coma induced guy that was talking to your mom?”

“What if I said he wasn’t drug induced? What if I said, he’s real, as real as you and me?”

“Then I would suggest you check yourself into a different kind of hospital, Sean?” she said, jokingly, but with a hint of seriousness.

“I’m not kidding,” I replied, looking into her face, letting her see that I was serious, that this was a reality. I watched as the realization that I wasn’t kidding around, that I was dead serious, soaked into her early morning mind.

“How is that even possible?” Essence asked, sipping her coffee. I didn’t really have an answer for her, so I sipped my coffee and pondered the question, trying to think of a solid answer that would satisfy both of us.

Instead, one option came to mind, I didn’t like it very much, but it seemed like the only one I could come up with. These last few weeks had made very little sense, from the shooting until now, I figured it was time to say it all out loud, to speak everything that had happened into existence, into reality. More questions would come, more answers would form, but first I had to let it all out.

“I’m going to try to explain it all to you,” I said, sipping my coffee and lighting another cigarette. “I’m going to talk about things in my childhood that nobody really knows about, that you should, so maybe you can understand my decision on why I think this is the way to go. Do you understand?”

“Not really, Sean. But I’m going to try, I promise, I’m going to try.”

I started at the beginning, telling her about things that happened in my childhood, things that no one knew about except the parties involved, things my mother never knew about, abuse I never told a soul about, tears ran from her face as I told her all of it, over three cups of coffee and a couple of cigarettes, she told me to stop more than once, but I couldn’t. If I didn’t tell her then, I would never her or anyone else about it all again.

Essence listened, once or twice squeezing my hand to give me strength, she listened and absorbed all that I had said, patiently waiting as I caught my breath. I closed my eyes and thought back to when I met Cynthia, I began the tale, slow, making sure I didn't leave out any of the details, remembering things nobody should have remembered, the smells in the air, the tastes on my tongue. Essence listened patiently, waiting for me to tie the stories together, to explain how Ed existed.

When I reached the point of the shooting, I could hear music, Guns N' Roses, softly in my head. Essence held me close as I remembered the shooting, the dreams that followed and Ed, talking to my mother, talking to her and Bristol, talking to me. She accepted my words for what they were, took them in as truth, as crazy as they sounded, doubt in her mind, but not in her demeanor. In the end, I felt as crazy as I sounded, wondering if all of the moments with Ed had only been in my mind,

"So what's supposed to happen now?" Essence asked, a look of concern on her face.

"Ed's supposed to call me again, give me time to get my affairs in order," I replied, realizing I had left the part about my soul out, not intentionally, but maybe something deep inside of me, keeping it out of the story. I felt off, weakened after telling her my tale. I felt relief that someone else knew, but at the same time, concerned. What if Ed would somehow know what was happening at this very moment.

"Can you do it? If he's as real as you say? Can you kill that man?"

"I plan on trying," I replied, cold, without emotion. "Cynthia did not deserve what he did to her! Especially now, getting away with it?"

"It's not right, but what if there's a catch?" Essence said, her thinking cap working in full effect now.

"I'm sure there's a catch, when is there ever not one? But I can't hardly sleep, knowing that he's out there, breathing air, living his life, while she's in a hole in the ground, with his last name, dead."

I lit a cigarette and Essence went into the kitchen, pouring another cup of coffee, turning off the machine and putting the pot in the sink. I watched her pace back and forth, sipping from her cup and

watching me, watching her. The world around us was changing, the world would never be the same, and who was to blame? Was this all my fault? Was Cynthia at the center of it all? What else could go wrong? What could be done to make the world right?

The moment was upon us, the time for me to take a step down one of two paths, to decide right from wrong, to choose life or death, to decide the fate of two men. I hadn't really thought it all through, hadn't considered the consequences of my actions, what would become of the man I filled, the body used as a vessel to commit the perfect crime. Many things had passed through my mind, but this wasn't one of them.

Was he married? Did he have children? What about a parent or brother or sister that he cared for, that with him gone, would die also? How many lives were ending for the price of Cynthia's husband. A man the police hadn't even given a name, one Cynthia had never passed on to me. All I knew him as was her husband. Nothing more, just a shadow in the night with bags of money, lead pipes and guns.

Essence sat by herself across the room, thinking hard, I could see it in her face. My mind on the other hand, was stuck on Cynthia, barely known, but loved deeply. Most times I felt the same about regulars, kind of hard not to. The way she walked, the way she talked, the few times I actually got her to laugh with me. I felt sorrow and then I began to feel anger, pain, loss, suffering, in my mind, I felt like it could all go away, by taking whatever chance Ed was offering. I had the urge to sit and wait for his call, to stay exactly where I was at until it rang.

Moments with Cynthia flashed through my mind like the bullets that struck around us, raining glass down on our heads. The bars, the hotel, the long walks home, these were all followed by images of what could have happened, maybe what should have happened. I wondered if I could risk it, to ask Ed, how big the miracles he could perform, would work. I was excited for a moment, before realizing that was not a possibility. Well, maybe.

Essence must have seen the change in my demeanor, however fast it had occurred, because she looked up at me, quiet, expecting me to have an outburst of knowledge or possibility. Neither came and

she went back to her thoughts, again looking down towards the floor, her mind starting to wander this way and that.

“You don’t have to do this, Sean,” Essence mumbled, finally.

“I think I do,” I replied, reaching for the pack of Marlboro 72s near my feet. “I feel like this is the only way.”

“The only way to what, exactly?”

“The only way to sleep easier, without these dreams, without these images of her in my head, laying there, on the concrete, dead.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, what advice to give to you, Sean,” Essence said, standing. “But if you do this, I can’t be a part of it, I don’t even want to know when it happens.”

“Where are you going,” I asked, Essence kissed my cheek and stood, turning towards the door, she blew me a kiss and whispered something I couldn’t quite make out. I had no way of knowing it would be the last time I saw her before all of this was finally over.

Chapter 16

I sat alone in the apartment, smoking cigarettes and staring at the phone, for what seemed like hours, but only minutes had passed. I felt crazy, like I was losing my mind, like it was drifting to some long forgotten place and I was stuck for the ride without a paddle. The sun outside sailed across the sky, morning turned into afternoon, afternoon became dusk, still the phone had not rung.

I walked into the kitchen, grabbed a glass out of the cabinet and started to pour a glass of water, when the phone rang. The glass slipped from my grasp and smashed around my feet as I ran towards the phone, droplets of water splashing against my jeans and bare feet.

“Hello?”

“Are you ready?” Ed said in his distinctive tone. “We can begin if you are.”

“Can I at least lay down first, so when whatever is controlling me, wakes up, it’s in a solid position.”

“As you wish,” Ed said, clicking his tongue. “Move it, we don’t have all night. This is going to take a lot out of me already.”

“Tell me about the guy I’m taking,” I said, lighting a cigarette and moving towards the bed.

“Brief summary. He’s 37, well maintained, exercises daily. Has a thing for younger boys and girls. Too clean to ever get in trouble for it. But this, well, make sure you leave an evidence trail. The jerk deserves it,” Ed said, sounding stressed out. “The guy is one of the Husband’s best friends, what’s that say about our guy?”

“Why won’t you say his name, Ed?”

“Because you don’t need to know or remember it. It make’s it even more personal, and you might back out.”

“I don’t see why backing out would be such a big deal,” I responded, wondering how Ed would respond to that one.

“I have a lot of things riding on this, Sean. That might be enough of an answer for now.”

I flicked my ashes and snubbed out the cigarette in a little aluminum ashtray. I laid back on the bed and tried to relax and loosen up.

“I guess I’m ready,” I said, closing my eyes. Ed didn’t even bother warning me, he just snapped his fingers, whistled a tune and I felt a release. I should have just left them open and watched instead of waiting until the movement started to open my eyes. Drifting up through the ceiling, above the city, praying that I wasn’t about to take the entire journey to New York like this.

Ed’s voice was in my head.

“Yes, sorry, my friend,” Ed responded to the question. “A shorter flight than an airline. But a few hours, none the less. Let the mind wonder, you’d be surprised how easy dreams will come in this state.”

I closed my eyes again, trying to silence the wind in my ears, I let my breath slow and my heart rate drop. Ed was right, surprisingly,

peace and serenity took over. I let the cool take over me, the feelings of doubt exiting stage left.

Thoughts of Cynthia flooded my mind, her milky chocolate skin, her rounded lips, her eyes, some of the easiest to get lost in. I thought of her smile, the way she lit me up inside, longing to feel her touch again. I craved her presence like a child craves it's mother's warmth after birth. Ed was somewhere probably listening to my thoughts but I did not care. All I could think about was Cynthia and how this man before me had destroyed her. The anger was building again, the desire to hurt him, to crush him, to make him feel the loss I was feeling every single day.

I felt the air around me begin to cool, as if I weren't alone in the sky anymore. I opened my eyes to the clouds and the majestic views around me. Ed was there, by my side, smiling his smile and nodding as we soared through the sky.

"You know, I could give her back to you," Ed said, his voice, devilishly seductive again. "She hasn't made the journey to the pit yet."

"What are you talking about, what pit?"

"That doesn't matter right now, Sean," Ed said, I noticed our speed beginning to slow, a large city skyline was before us, New York City.

"Our flight is nearing it's end, when all is said and done here, I will make you one final offer, but I warn you, if you accept, the sacrifice will be even greater than any you have ever experienced."

I took the words in without responding, I was learning slowly that the only way to figure out Ed's cryptic messages was to think about them, ponder them, dissect them. We soared between the buildings, invisible to the world. The lights of Times Square were blinding to the eye, beautiful at the same time in the darkness. I felt illuminated by thousands of suns. The streets below were aglow with light, the cars, shiny little matchbox toys.

"When it begins, you will have little time, Sean," Ed said, sounding weaker than usual. "That is because this trip had drained my energy. I am not some freak with unlimited power, I was a man, just like you once. Long ago."

“How much time are we talking about?” I said, looking in his direction, but he was gone.

In my head, his voice rang out as clear as ever.

“When you enter his body, the timer will start, keep an eye on his watch. You have thirty minutes to be done with your business both with the husband and the vessel.”

“How long til I reach him?”

“Oh, any moment now,” Ed said.

I heard a snap and a pop and I was solid again, not myself, someone else. I was standing in the men’s room of a large building, I could feel the shift from the wind outside. I looked into the mirror and saw the face of another man. He had my eyes, green and bright, but everything else, it was all his. From the thinning gray hair, the slightly hooked nose, the goatee that he dyed every morning to a dark auburn. He was skinny, tight muscle under old flesh.

“How’s this gonna work?”

“Arnold is in his office, two doors down on the right, if you check your right breast pocket, a joint is there. Offer to go up to the roof for a smoke, he’ll take you up on it. He hasn’t been sleeping much since he left Knoxville.”

“Bastard doesn’t deserve to sleep.”

I checked all of my motor functions, seeing if he had a limp, or a bad hand, anything that I needed to know about before I started strolling around a skyscraper. I felt my pocket and pulled out what was there, a tightly rolled joint held in professionally manicured fingers. I took a whiff of it and coughed. It was some killer stuff, this guy did everything expensive.

“Even little boys, Sean, don’t forget that,” Ed said, “when deciding how guilty to make him look, remember what he does in his free time.”

“Ed, I’m ready.”

Act iii
Judgement & Rebirth